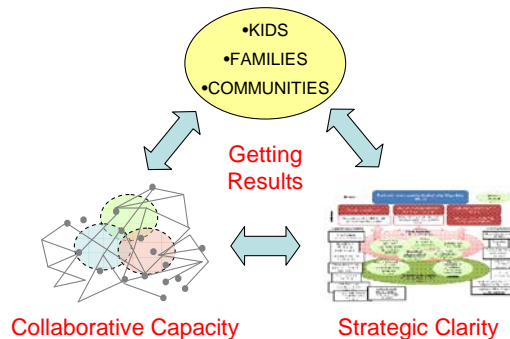


Leveraging Collaborative Capacity and Strategic Clarity for results: A community-of-practice approach

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An applied research report prepared for the
Annie E. Casey Foundation



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This monograph reports on a cross-walk analysis of a Making Connections (MC) study that showed how collaborative, action-learning structures improve results and sustainability. The purpose of the cross-walk was to vet site-based findings in Providence and see to what extent the ideas developed in that context were applicable to other sites and to the Making Connections program overall; broader implications of the work were also explored. The review included several group conversations with Annie E. Casey Foundation (AECF) staff at headquarters and in the field, as well as analyses of a variety of instruments and reports related to the overall Making Connections program. The study found strong alignment with the theory of change articulated in the original Providence study:

Collaborative multi-stakeholder groups foster smart civic strategies and the ability to implement them, which in turn, drive exceptional, sustained results.

AECF is a leading practitioner of a distinctive competence that synergistically combines Collaborative Capacity and Strategic Clarity (CCxSC). This report suggests ways to apply this strategic capability more systematically to achieve exceptional results for vulnerable kids and families. There is much evidence that AECF is committed to leveraging CCxSC as a core competence; but there remain development challenges to address as well as ripe opportunities to pursue. AECF today is particularly strong in areas related to strategy and evaluation; its best growth opportunity is to build on its pioneering work in collaboration.

A community-of-practice perspective highlights opportunities to strengthen collaborative capacity by cultivating multi-lateral groups that include both residents and organizational partners, and whose purpose is to provide sustained stewardship in targeted domains. Civic communities of practice focus on public-good outcomes—such as family economic success and children ready for school—and they emphasize capacity-building as well as achieving strategic targets. In fact, this study points out opportunities to cultivate communities of practice for improving results at several levels: among civic stakeholders at the local level; among practitioners across sites; among internal AECF staff and program participants; and among external practitioners, researchers, policy makers and others at the national level.

The way forward—consistent with the belief that collaboration is the key to building capability—is to establish both “internal” and “external” communities of practice that focus on the theory and practice of CCxSC. An internal community can connect staff to build expertise in this area and diffuse it across programs; an external community can bring together leading experts and organizations nationwide to increase the visibility and influence of the work. These complementary communities can generate ideas, tools, and relationships that fuel the success of ambitious multi-stakeholder groups working in cities nationwide.

This report is meant to be a catalyst to help AECF explore the potential for more intensive applications of CCxSC approaches, assess where it stands today, and identify practical next steps for moving ahead. The concluding section extends the lens. It argues that the Making Connections effort to apply CCxSC more explicitly and systematically is an instance of a broader social movement. In recent years there has been exponential growth (though the numbers are still relatively small) in collaborative, network-based, action-learning initiatives for achieving breakthrough results on an array of social, economic, and environmental challenges. AECF has an extraordinary opportunity to lead the way in applying these approaches more widely and systematically to improve the lives of vulnerable kids and families and their communities.

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this report is to describe a synergistic, composite capability—defined here as “Collaborative Capacity combined with Strategic Clarity” (CCxSC)—and how it is applied in the Annie E. Casey Foundation (AECF) Making Connections (MC) program and beyond. Questions to address include:

- What is CCxSC?
- Why is it important to AECF’s success?
- How can AECF build this capability as a strategic core competence and fully leverage it to achieve exceptional, sustained results for vulnerable kids and families and their communities?

This report draws on an earlier study of the Making Connections Providence site, which was based on a community-of-practice (CoP) analysis. Communities of practice are topic-focused, network-based, action-learning structures. The study’s chief finding was that these types of structures are an essential component of a more general “collaborative capacity” to bring people together to achieve civic outcomes (such as family economic success and children ready for school). A practical implication was that the Making Connections program should do more to ensure that collaborative capacity gets as much attention as strategy-making and evaluation. But the point was not simply to enhance collaborative capacity. Rather, the site-analysis concluded that the power of both collaborating and strategy-making processes is greatly enhanced when they are combined.

The results of this research were reviewed twice in Providence, with both site-team members and residents; additionally, a cross-walk to vet the validity and generalizability of the findings was conducted via several group conversations with AECF headquarters and field staff familiar with all the MC sites. Further, the work was compared with recent reports, program descriptions, and tools and frameworks associated with Making Connections (for example, site assessment instruments and LME criteria).

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In interviews and group conversations with residents and Making Connections (MC) staff in Providence, and with headquarters staff working in sites nationwide, there was emphatic agreement and collective resonance with the assertion that the ability to combine Collaborative Capacity (CC) and Strategic Clarity (SC) is the key to achieving exceptional results for vulnerable kids, families, and neighborhoods. As participants in Providence stated regarding an initial presentation of a CC-based analysis of their work:

“This helps us explain what we knew but could not articulate.”

Indeed, Providence participants had struggled to articulate rigorously and systematically the nature of CC and its relationship to SC and ultimately to results. In conversations with Annie E. Casey Foundation staff working in other sites, we found this was true for Making Connections participants more broadly. This conceptual ambiguity has held back AECF’s ability to leverage what it knows. Building a clearer and more rigorous understanding of CC is a necessary foundation for developing and implementing CCxSC initiatives in any program where competent collaborative participation is the key to success.

AECF has developed an extraordinary knowledge base regarding issues and interventions for kids and families, and it is renowned for its strategic rigor. But given its ambitious aspirations, AECF's CC skills still have much room for growth. Collaboration is a core AECF value and related methods show up in various programs and sites, but they are not applied as systematically or intensively as needed to fulfill their potential. AECF has nevertheless had many successes, which are witness to its growing capabilities and the enthusiasm of its staff for this type of work.

AECF should now launch a strategic initiative to provide stronger stewardship for its CCxSC capability. Societal forces are driving the need for dramatic increases in our civic capacity for learning and collaboration. Growing disparities in income, health, and education are only making the challenges for struggling families more complex, intractable, and urgent. Incremental improvements in technical solutions are fated to lose ground to problems driven by more fundamental social conditions. Indeed, only a quantum change in CCxSC capabilities among players at the grassroots and grassstops can respond to the types of problems AECF is addressing.¹ (One example: Even with universal healthcare and various medical advances, the grossly disproportionate rates of cancer and diabetes among poor and minorities cannot be cut without radically increased multi-stakeholder collaboration at the neighborhood level as well as among leaders and policy-makers across all sectors.) From a risk perspective, AECF may begin losing ground on mission achievement unless it starts a concerted effort to apply CC as intently and systematically as it does SC, and to implement both as a synergistic composite capability.

AECF faces considerable challenges to ramping up its CCxSC capabilities to get to the next level. These challenges are especially difficult because success depends not only on AECF's competencies, but also on those of its local and national partners. By definition, you cannot operate at high levels of collaboration unless you have willing and capable partners. Key challenges to applying CCxSC for AECF and its partners include: the embeddedness of current structures, inherent difficulty of the work, and power dynamics. Collaborative action for civic goals has generally been unsuccessful in the United States (and worldwide generally). As a society, we have not yet evolved the skills and norms this work requires. It is dangerous to underestimate the challenge because then it is less likely that we will see the gaps and generate the energy, learning, and innovation required to close them. This is a paradigm shift; it involves changing basic assumptions and developing new core competencies.

The path towards a quantum jump in CCxSC capability is not an easy one, but its direction is straightforward and conceptually consistent. AECF can begin by cultivating two complementary communities of practice on the theory and practice of CCxSC: an internal one to leverage AECF's CCxSC capabilities across its various programs, and an

¹ See Figure A14 (in attached Appendix document) for a depiction of the risk of not learning fast enough in a context of exponential rates of change. Incremental improvement only leads to a growing "capability gap" and declining performance with respect to market requirements. The danger is to fall victim to the "boiled frog syndrome" in which a frog in a pail of gradually heating water (changing market conditions) does not notice what is happening until it is too late jump. Top executives (like everyone else) are often constrained by embedded cognitive frames that manage to fit contradictory data to an outworn paradigm. The challenge is to seek out alternative views to see the risks and discover new opportunities.

external one to learn from others’ experiences and research. These communities can consolidate current knowledge and bring practitioners together to guide the work and build the practice over time. The internal community consists of AECF staff as well as beneficiaries and stakeholders who are directly involved in its programs; the external community includes researchers, practitioners, and representatives of stakeholder organizations who are passionate about this work.

These complementary communities of practice can provide a number of benefits: help AECF leverage CCxSC in an array of programs through improved skills, methods, and program designs; promote this capability more broadly among both local and national beneficiaries and partners; and raise the visibility and legitimacy of the CCxSC approach among funders and policy makers—all towards achieving dramatic improvements in sustainable outcomes for vulnerable kids, families, and neighborhoods.

One way to frame this study, in fact, is as a nested set of communities of practice (CoPs) that are building, sharing, and applying CCxSC capabilities at several levels: At the “on-the-ground” level (1), local multi-stakeholder “results teams” operate as hybrid CoPs that emphasize community learning and connecting while also working to achieve team-based strategic targets. At the site level (2), leaders of results teams share ideas, tools, and contacts. Across sites at the national level (3), practitioners participate in “Learning Exchanges” and related activities to develop and diffuse insights, skills, and methods. Finally, the “internal” and “external” CCxSC communities (4, 5) integrate an overall learning system that serves practitioners and stakeholders at all levels (see Figure 1 below).

Communities of practice at multiple levels to promote development of CCxSC capabilities in various contexts

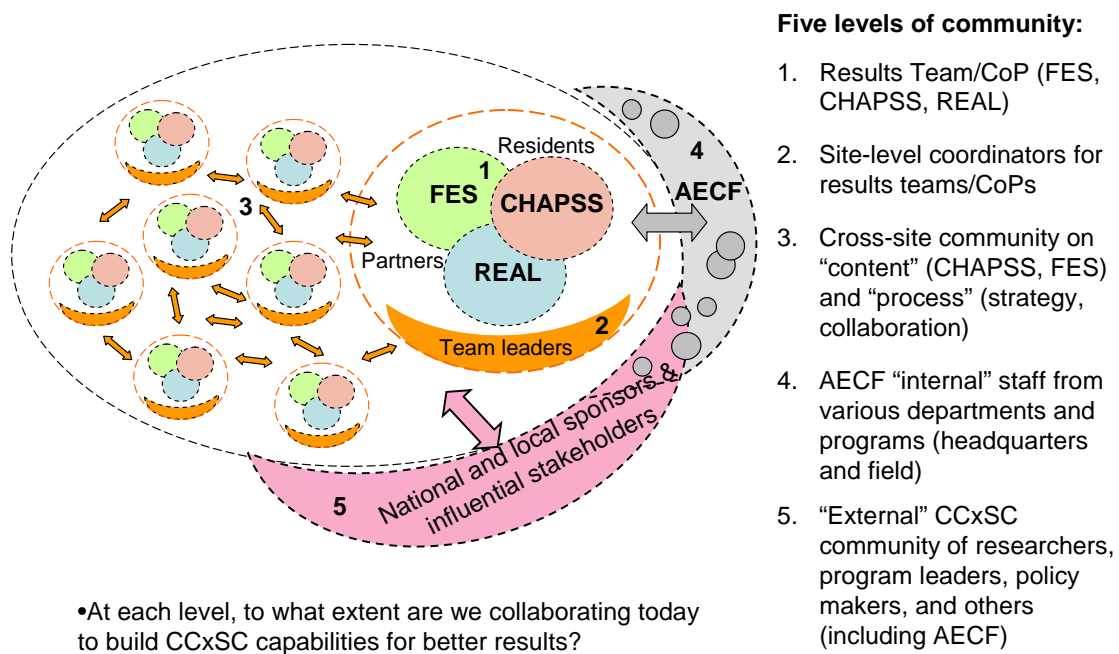


Figure 1. Communities of practices at multiple levels building CCxSC capabilities for results

Regarding the study itself, several caveats are in order: Due to the limitations of the study and of my knowledge of the Foundation's work, many of the questions raised here may appear naïve; the answers may be well-established; my comments and critiques may be off the mark; and many of the arguments and assertions may come off as preaching to the choir. Indeed, AECF is a pioneer in designing and applying collaborative approaches and I have learned a great deal while studying AECF's work and talking with AECF staff and local MC participants.

Although the report focuses more on gaps than strengths (and this is a weakness that reflects its limited scope), the study also highlights ripe opportunities for building on AECF's capabilities. Indeed, without AECF's strong base of experience and the passionate commitments and skills of its staff members, there would be little to work with, and this report would not have been written. I hope the issues raised and recommendations offered—even when they are off the mark—will spark useful insights.

Finally, it has been energizing to work with AECF staff at headquarters and local levels. It is inspiring to see your passion for a compelling mission and your commitment to learn and connect with others to realize its potential.

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This report is organized into eight sections that outline the theory of change for CCxSC; identify gaps and opportunities; and offer recommendations:

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2. Snapshot of CCxSC in action: Making Connections Providence, p. 12
3. Opportunities for more systematic application of CCxSC approaches in the MC program, p. 16
4. CCxSC as a core competence at the corporate level, p. 42
5. Challenges to a full-fledged CCxSC application, p. 46
6. Recommendations: A way forward, p. 54
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- Figure 2. CCxSC Theory of Change, p. 6
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See a companion document for an appendix of figures, tables, and boxes that are referred to in the report with the prefix "A" (for Appendix), beginning with Figure A14. (Full-size PowerPoint versions of Figures 1-13, which appear in the report itself, are also available in a separate document.)

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1. COLLABORATIVE CAPACITY COMBINED WITH STRATEGIC CLARITY (CCxSC) THEORY OF CHANGE (TOC)

Defining the CCxSC TOC (See Figure 2 below.)

Simply stated, the CCxSC theory of change asserts that *collaborative multi-stakeholder groups foster smart civic strategies and the ability to implement them, which in turn, drive exceptional, sustained results*. We define the two critical components in the model, Collaborative Capacity (CC) and Strategic Clarity (SC) as follows:

- *Collaborative capacity* is the collective ability of community stakeholders—across all sectors, including residents and organizational partners—to work and learn collaboratively for the common good
- *Strategic clarity* is a collective cognitive capacity to understand issues, trends, data, and conditions; to design effective interventions; and to assess and reformulate these interventions over time.

As defined in this report, the agents of CC are specified broadly to include individual residents and partners as well as any groups or organizations they represent, such as community groups, non-profit agencies, government offices, faith communities, schools, businesses, foundations, and others. The report draws on community-of-practice research to describe network-based structures that can help these diverse players learn and work together to achieve common goals.

The CCxSC Theory of Change: Collaborative Capacity combined with Strategic Clarity gets sustained results

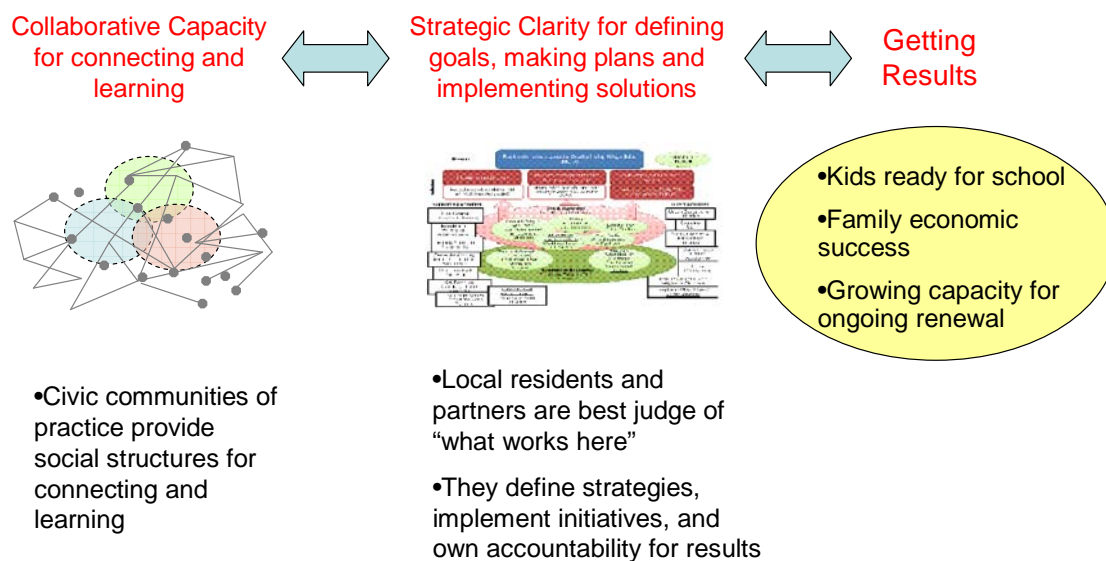


Figure 2. CCxSC Theory of Change

A brief review of the concept of collaboration helps to establish how collaborative capacity complements strategic clarity:

- *Distinctions*: Collaboration is distinguished from cooperation and coordination: *Cooperation* means mutual support on an ad hoc basis without ongoing, formal commitments. *Coordination* involves explicit adjustments—for example, in scheduling, staffing, or standards—but without commitment to shared objectives. *Collaboration* is about joint commitments to an overarching purpose and ongoing, collective initiatives to accomplish goals together that could not be achieved otherwise.²
- *Contingencies*: Collaboration is not the right approach for all situations. Building relationships and working across boundaries—whether organizations, constituencies, sectors, or disciplines—is difficult to start and requires considerable energy to sustain. Therefore, given limited resources, it is important to target problems that most warrant collaboration. In many cases, it may be more prudent (at least in the short term) to use less intensive cooperation or coordination methods.
 - Conditions that call for collaboration include complex, “messy” problems; ones that involve diverse players; that require multiple perspectives and types of expertise; where solutions cannot be implemented without sustained commitments by diverse parties.
- *Structural foundation*: Network-based structures that build mutual trust and foster collective learning among diverse stakeholders provide the foundation for effective and sustained collaboration. Such structures—often called “communities of practice”—rely on personal commitments, informal relationships, and voluntary participation. Although these are essentially informal phenomena, a growing body of research and experience shows that they can nonetheless be cultivated intentionally and systematically.
- *Learning emphasis*: Learning is crucial along multiple dimensions: learning cognitively, behaviorally, and emotionally; learning about each other as well as about the problems and possible solutions; learning at individual, group, organizational, and societal levels.
- *Boundary-crossing*: Collaboration bridges the grassroots and grasstops; it works horizontally (among residents and partners in a neighborhood for example), and vertically (linking grassroots leaders with grasstops policy-makers, funders, and researchers who operate at local, state, and national levels).
- *Success factors* include: shared goals and values; trust and reciprocity; a requisite variety of key players; core skills (such as community-organizing, group problem-solving, and conflict-resolution); and leadership, including a roles such as weaver, organizer, thought leader, project manager, boundary spanner, sponsor, and others.

In sum, collaboration in practice is a highly complex, skill-intensive, ambitious undertaking. It is often invoked in moral terms as the right thing to do and in practical terms as the only way to overcome intransigent obstacles for achieving urgent priorities, such as thriving kids, families, and neighborhoods. But we are just beginning to learn

² Himmelman, A.T. 2002. “Collaboration for a Change: Definitions, Decision-Making Models, Roles, and Collaboration Process Guide,” Minneapolis, MN: arthurhimmelman@aol.com

what it takes to succeed. Key elements include combining collaborative capacity with strategic clarity, and cultivating robust network-based structures—communities of practice—to establish a foundation for joint problem-solving and ongoing civic stewardship.

Forces driving the need for collaboration and community

There are a number of secular forces in the social sector that are driving the need for collaborative learning and action. In fact, these factors are endemic to all sectors and are pervasive at global levels as well as at national and local ones. Forces driving the need for collaboration involve both the nature of the problems and emerging opportunities to solve them. Examples include:

- Complexity, urgency, and dynamism of problems (such as the persistent disparities in income, health, education, housing, safety, etc.)
- Scarcity of resources
- Diversity of constituencies (demographics, sectors, faiths, affiliations, etc.; for example, an incipient “majority minority” national demographic profile)
- Growing need for interdisciplinary skills and expertise to address intractable problems
- Increasing expectations among stakeholders for involvement and collaboration
- Plethora of emerging social and technical collaboration methodologies, such as collaborative hardware and software technologies, dialogic problem-solving, social network analysis, communities of practice, and others^{3 4}

Dynamic interdependency of collaborative capacity and strategic clarity

The CCxSC theory of change, as is typical for logic models, is described here as more linear than it is in practice. In fact, the relationship of CC and SC is dynamically interdependent in several ways. Collaborative capacity is essential for complex strategic problem-solving, and in turn, working together on strategies builds shared understanding and trust. Overall, these reciprocal dynamics between CC and SC will influence implementation and ongoing cycles of renewal and adaptation. Thus, the CCxSC TOC in practice is more like a synergistic web of interactions than it is a linear sequence of organizing, planning, and implementing.

The value of CC for strategic clarity and implementation is clear: the ability to solve problems, innovate, and implement complex initiatives can only go so far without a social

³ Paul Adler argues that inter-organizational cooperative relationships are becoming more common as knowledge and innovation become driving factors for success. He writes, “A burgeoning body of research shows that when firms need innovation and knowledge...no combination of strong hierarchical control and market discipline can assure as high a level of performance as trust-based community (“Markets, Hierarchy, and Trust: The Knowledge Economy and the Future of Capitalism,” *Organizational Science*, 12:2, 2000: 214-234).

⁴ Svendsen and Laberge argue that “stakeholder networks” combine players from various sectors and disciplines and are now essential for the success of private sector firms. Their description of these networks parallels the elements highlighted here; they mention outreach, learning, innovation, and joint action. They state that leading firms are “moving out of the centre of the hub and spoke set of bilateral relationships to become active members or conveners of stakeholder networks” (A. Svendsen and M. Laberge, “Engaging Networks for Whole System Change,” in *The challenge of implementing corporate social responsibility*, 2007).

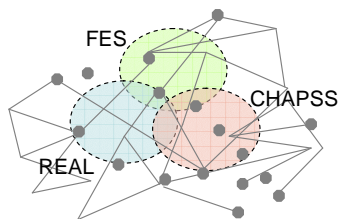
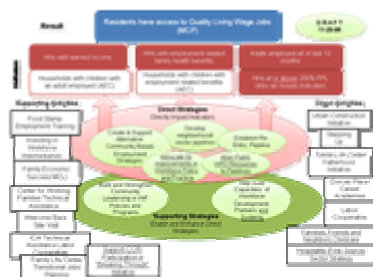
foundation of mutual trust, diversity, and reciprocity. The achievement ceiling is ultimately determined by collaborative capacity. Your upside potential depends on the quality of your community. Even with the best of intentions, well-researched, externally driven strategic solutions are destined to under-perform without an equally strategic commitment of time, talent, and resources to build collaborative capacity among residents and partners. As Making Connections participants have said:

- “I need to know you care before I care what you know....”
- “Residents are the best judges of what works here....”

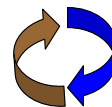
There are a number of ways in which CC and SC work as synergistic bundles of relationships and activities (see Figure 3 below; also Figure A15). Benefits of combining collaborative capacity and strategic clarity include:

- a wider set of ideas to draw on
- broader and stronger ownership for initiatives and accountability for results
- greater leverage of social capital and financial resources (via co-investments and grantee joint-ventures/mergers)
- more competent implementation of programs
- greater legitimacy among players at both the grassroots and grasstops
- increased skills for making, implementing, and renewing complex strategies.

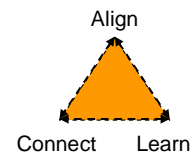
Getting results by “leading with ideas” ... and by “making connections”



• **Strategic Clarity** defines outcomes, indicators, strategies, activities, and accountabilities; the “What”



• **Collaborative Capacity** of diverse players working and learning together engages the “Who” and provides the “How”



Collaborative Capacity is the goose that lays the golden eggs

Figure 3. Defining Collaborative Capacity and Strategic Clarity as synergistic elements of a composite capability

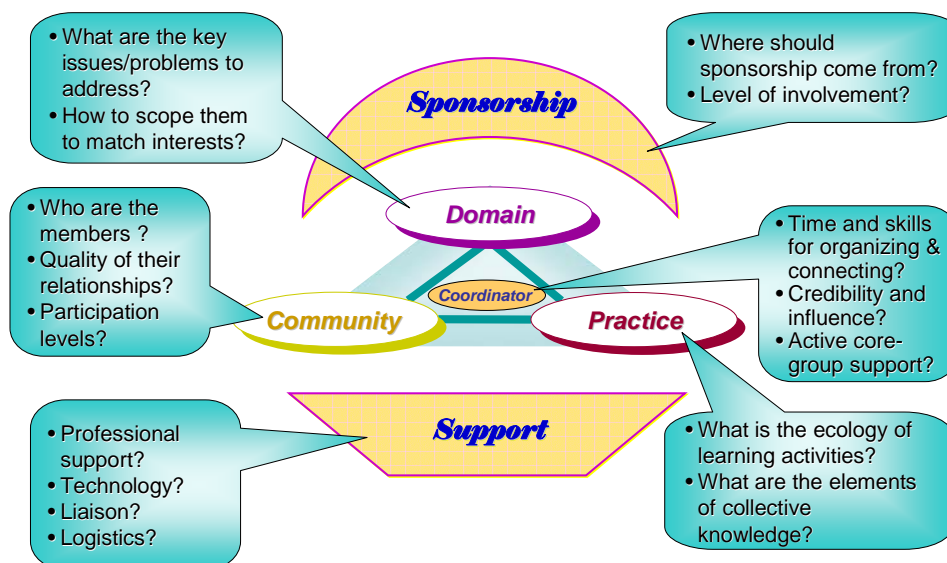
CCxSC interdependence is implicit in the growing recognition over the last several years among AECF MC staff about the importance of resident engagement and “authentic demand.” But as AECF staff have learned, it is not a simple matter for residents to agree among themselves on what they need, especially when there is so much to learn about problems, solutions, and each other. Because demands are complex and not monolithic, it requires collaborative interaction and mutual learning among residents to identify priorities and consolidate a collective willingness to work and learn together. In fact, this action-learning capacity is essential for a vital “demand-and-response system” that includes residents, partners, funders, and policy makers who operate on both sides of the equation. Thus the overall CCxSC assessment question is, How active and effective are collaborative action and learning efforts throughout the whole system?

Communities of practice provide social structures for collaborative capacity

The CCxSC theory of change points to the foundational importance of collaborative structures and processes. We depend on social structures that can scaffold collaborative processes for learning (including strategic thinking and tactical problem-solving) and action (implementing and adapting ideas in practice). The strength and resilience of this social scaffolding becomes more important as the problems become more complex and dynamic, and as the diversity of players increases. This is why leading businesses have pioneered large-scale efforts to cultivate communities of practice. For firms worldwide, increasingly competitive global markets have radically raised the bar on requirements for developing talent, solving problems, and being able to innovate and rapidly diffuse new solutions. Executives and practitioners alike have turned to communities of practice as network-based, action-learning structures that complement formal systems and structures as a way to stay at the leading edge. In recent years, the number of community-of-practice initiatives has grown exponentially, including ones in all sectors, in thousands of organizations, involving hundreds of disciplines, in countries worldwide.

Communities of practice: Conceptual framework

Communities of practice are groups of people who learn together over time as they work in areas of shared passion or concern.



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Figure 4. Conceptual framework for CoPs

Communities of practice are defined as *groups of people who learn together over time as they work in areas of shared passion or concern* (see Figure 4 above).⁵ The three main structural components of a community of practice are its domain (what it is about and why), community (who is involved and how), and its practice (both the practice repertoire and practice-development activities). See Figure 5 below for an illustrative application to a results team initiative in Providence. (Note: the information in Figure 5 is outdated and has not been vetted.) The figure suggests how the community-of-practice framework can be used as a practical analytical tool by a group that wants to build its collaborative capacity. The process begins by identifying and assessing domain priorities; brainstorming who to engage and how to build relationships; and targeting specific initiatives for building the practice, working together, and achieving shared goals.

“Case clinic” questions for analyzing a results team as a community of practice

- Collectively defining and committing to key issues and indicators?
- Levels of passion and focus?
- Clear value to stakeholders as well as participants?

- Right players involved?
- Trust and reciprocity?
- Collective ownership or balkanized, competing partnerships?

- How are activities designed? Portfolio of long- and short-term?
- How are players learning about issues & each other?
- Integrating action & learning?

MC-Providence/FES
(Illustrative)

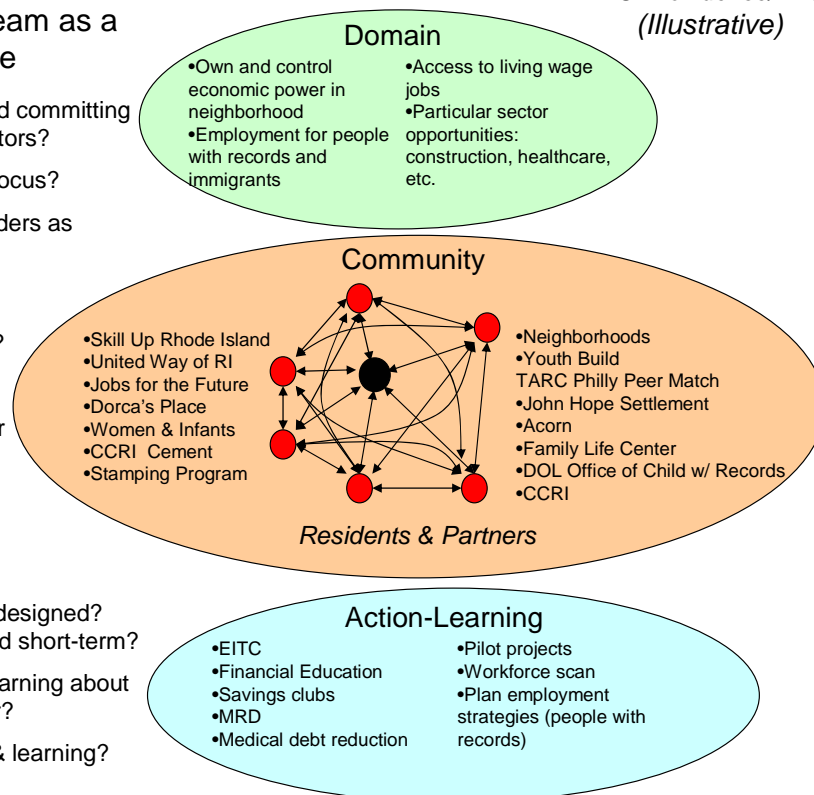


Figure 5. Using the community-of-practice framework to develop a results team as a community of practice (this illustration is draws on preliminary 2006 archival data, not site interviews)

⁵ Communities of practice are not different from networks; rather they are a *type* of network in which a shared identity, mutual engagement in action-learning activities, and voluntary relationships are defining characteristics. They are the kind of network most germane to CC applications. In general, the term network also includes configurations of people who know only a few people in the network; who participate for self-interested transactions, such as finding a job, advocating for an issue, or staying informed about what's happening around them; or there may be no reason to be in the network except that one just happens to be “someone who knows someone....” Tools for analyzing generic networks, such as social network analysis (SNA), are also useful for understanding and developing community-of-practice networks. For more on the what, why, and how of communities of practice, see E. Wenger, R. McDermott, and W.M. Snyder, *Cultivating Communities of Practice*, 2002.

A brief review of the structural characteristics of CoPs demonstrates why they are particularly appropriate as a foundational structure for CC:

- Personal relationships provide a powerful basis for fostering collaborative learning and action
- Informal as well as formal action-learning activities are crucial for building tacit as well as and explicit dimensions of practice
- Participants' passions fuel the energy for ongoing, collaborative action-learning activities to overcome boundaries and divisions (for example, the passion of mothers and fathers to find better opportunities for their kids and financial stability for their families)
- Inter-organizational network structures can foster linkages that reach vertically (grassroots and grasstops) as well as horizontally (across diverse sectors, constituencies, and disciplines)
- Ecologies of action-learning activities accelerate and enhance diffusion of ideas and methods across sites, while they also increase participants' willingness to share skills and resources

Summary

The combination of collaborative capacity and strategic clarity is the key to solving today's complex civic problems. The application of CCxSC approaches depends on foundational collaborative structures that bring diverse parties together, foster joint action-learning activities, and provide sustained stewardship for problems and opportunities as they evolve. The community-of-practice framework describes the key characteristics of these structures and can be used to analyze and strengthen multi-stakeholder initiatives such as results teams. Finally, CoP theory highlights the dynamic interdependence of collaborative structures and strategic problem-solving processes. It provides a robust platform for an overall analysis of a "CCxSC system"; and it shows how AECF can work with partners and program participants to build CCxSC capabilities.

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2. SNAPSHOT OF CCxSC IN ACTION: MAKING CONNECTIONS IN PROVIDENCE

This section provides a snapshot of the CCxSC in action in the Making Connections Providence site. The Providence experience highlights accomplishments and challenges and provides a reference point for an extended discussion in Section 3 about ways to enhance AECF's CCxSC capability. Finally, it shows how multi-stakeholder "results teams" can operate as hybrid communities of practice that focus on achieving performance outcomes (related to kids and families) as well as on efforts to learn and connect as a basis for sustained civic renewal.

What have we accomplished? ⁶

As a reference point for what the MC program has accomplished in the area of CCxSC, it is worth briefly reviewing accomplishments in the Providence site over the last several

⁶ This review is based on conversations with Providence site participants in late 2006. This is by no means a detailed or systematic review. Rather, these selected points are made simply to illustrate CCxSC in practice.

years. Providence is a particularly interesting example because the original site team used a relatively contentious community-organizing strategy to engage residents. The strategy elicited a great deal of energy and strong voices among some participants, but it did not yield a shared set of priorities and did not foster relationships and trust among diverse residents and local partners (including representatives of local non-profits and government agencies). The effort ultimately collapsed, and it resulted in hurt feelings and distrust that made it difficult to recover. Later a new site team was established, and this team has made a great deal of progress in the last several years by emphasizing approaches consistent with both strategic clarity and collaborative capacity. Although Providence is not the top site in the national MC program, it has moved from near the bottom to near the top, while demonstrating in a highly visible way what it takes to succeed. Both local participants and headquarters staff believe that the groundwork has been laid in Providence for sustained progress.

Several multi-stakeholder “results teams” have been established in Providence. These groups of about 20 participants vary in their development, but each includes a mix of residents and organizational partners who are working systematically to develop rigorous strategies—complete with desired outcomes, indicators, and a number of “direct” and “supporting” strategic initiatives that are owned by a variety of players (see Figure A16). Overall, the results teams are evolving as robust civic structures that can serve in an ongoing capacity to promote learning, connecting, and progress on MC goals related to Family Economic Success (FES), Children Healthy And Prepared for School Success (CHAPSS), and Resident Engagement And Leadership (REAL). Since 2006, efforts to cultivate organizational partners along with residents have accelerated in the wake of site-team review sessions that highlighted the synergies between collaborative capacity and strategic clarity.

Snapshot of MC Providence from a CC perspective: Accomplishments, challenges, and strengths for moving ahead

The multi-stakeholder results teams in Providence are examples of structures that promote CCxSC activities. The following participant comments and external observations describe the benefits, challenges, and core strengths of the results teams:

Benefits:

- “Results teams (also called ‘learning communities’) build trust and people get used to working together. This is what MC needs to be, in essence.”
- “Since creating the teams we’ve come a million miles regarding collaboration and learning. When I started, key organizations wouldn’t come to the table”
- “Partners are now working on RFP’s together (for example, one on literacy) to get funding as a collaborative”

Challenges:

- “Providence has a balkanized culture”; for example, the school system is highly fractured
- Competition among local non-profits makes it difficult in some cases to bring people to the table

- “Some partners like to say no”; or they are constrained by statutes (e.g., federal agencies) or scarce resources (simply don’t have time to send staff to meetings not directly related to current initiatives, especially senior decision-makers, who are key participants)
- It is time-consuming, difficult, and painful working through differences
- “We need to do more to get residents involved in our group but I thought we needed key organizations involved to ensure ideas will get implemented”
- The pressure to demonstrate measurable value can get in the way of establishing collaborative capacity for sustained progress (“we’re just now gaining momentum”)
- Collaboration investments can be risky and do not always have clear short-term benefits to participating organizations as they are currently configured
- Breakthroughs rely on skills and attitudes of individual leaders representing their organizations
- Power differentials (for example, the power of a rich national foundation vs. a struggling local non-profit that needs funds) can make it more difficult to trust participants’ intentions; they may influence surface behaviors for a while without changing underlying values (“will the collaboration continue when the money’s gone?”)
- Participants are concerned about the level of buy-in by partners to the AECF approach: “You can’t measure the level of collaboration just by the amount of participation in RBA training and results teams because participation is a condition for grants eligibility.”

Core strengths to build on:

- “We have strong resident relationships in the neighborhoods in which we work,” in some cases, because site team members have lived in these neighborhoods for years
- Access to city and state agencies: “In Providence—or even statewide—you’re usually only two degrees of separation from who you need to work with.”
- Tight organizing processes that respect participants’ value-for-time; strategies, analysis tools, and indicators help to clarify goals and ways to achieve them
- AECF legitimacy and knowledge resources
- Skilled and collaborative MCP site team ⁷
 - “We learn about ourselves, get advice, and cross-pollinate ideas; and out of that we find ways to do things together”
 - “Within the site we have strong team spirit, a sense of kinship and friendship”
 - “The professional sharing and respect and the level of experience is amazing”

⁷ The five comments by results-team coordinators under the heading “Skilled and collaborative MCP site team” clearly reflect their experience as a community of practice in which they “learn about [each other], get advice, and cross-pollinate ideas” across their respective results teams. Although these coordinators focus on different outcomes—for example, children ready for school and financial economic success—they share a common CCxSC practice that applies in each context. This community of results-team coordinators is the Level 2 community of practice referred to in Figure 1, p. 4 above. (The fourth comment on this list, at top of p. 15, points to the inescapable complexity and uncertainty involved with coordinating the joint engagement of both residents and partners (cf. discussion in Section 3A, p. 20).)

- “We talk about the differences in our collaboration strategies to improve our results. For example, we differ on the balance and timing of partner and resident engagement”
- “We use common resources and approaches across results teams”

The Making Connections experience in Providence, despite rough going in the early years, demonstrates the power of a synergistic combination of CC and SC approaches. We see both promising accomplishments and typical challenges in this case. Results teams have developed rigorous strategic plans and built relationships among partners and residents who must collaborate to implement them. Meanwhile, there is more to do to improve the mix and commitment as well as number of participants to achieve targets. The case demonstrates how crucial it is to have a local site team that has sufficient CC and SC skills to succeed.

Reflections on results teams as a community-team hybrid

The results teams in Providence showed how groups that incorporate functions of both outcome-oriented teams and capacity-building communities can operate as synergistic hybrid structures. CoP theory explains how the action-learning activities and “requisite variety” (in terms of constituencies, skills, influence, resources, etc.) of multi-stakeholder groups can drive performance.^{8 9} Here, a CoP analysis highlights how results teams can contribute to capacity-building by fostering learning activities and relationships, thus complementing their strategic planning efforts to achieve targeted results. The CoP lens is particularly useful in this context because complex, dynamic challenges such as family economic success and children ready for school require inter-disciplinary capabilities and sustained action-learning to address. Such challenges cannot be met by project-based teams that are organized solely to solve narrowly defined problems, which they address with conventional solutions, and then move on. In fact, a combination of team and community structures is needed to achieve near-term results while providing long-term stewardship that builds capabilities for sustained improvements over time.

The core dimensions of communities of practice—community, practice, and domain—provide a concise framework for explaining how CoPs complement teams. Communities of practice emphasize the importance of voluntary participation, learning as well as doing, and goals that align with the passions of members, not only with the requirements of stakeholders. These characteristics—related to connecting, learning, and alignment—are all relevant for results teams. *Connecting* residents and partners is essential to the success of results teams’ success, but members will only participate if they get value for themselves. (Part of this value may be the promise of foundation grants, but that only goes so far and is not sustainable in this case.) *Learning* is crucial in these contexts because the problems are complex and participants have radically varied backgrounds—the learning is thus as much

⁸ K. Weick, in *The social psychology of organizing* (1969), uses the term “requisite variety” to explain why solving complex problems requires equally complex combinations of capabilities (pp. 188-193). The CCxSC hypothesis takes it a step further by asserting that complex, dynamic capabilities require equally complex (diverse yet cohesive) groups.

⁹ For a detailed study of communities of practice taking on complex civic challenges, see W.M. Snyder and X. de S. Briggs, *Communities of Practice: A new tool for managers*, 2003: www.businessofgovernment.org/publications (see the Safe Cities case on reducing gun violence on pp. 26-32).

about getting to know each other as it is about the problems themselves. Finally, *aligning* goals among stakeholders cannot be achieved simply by focusing on quantifiable measures of desired outcomes. The alignment process must include opportunities for participants to talk about what they care about and why. Strategic goals are not enough; a communal sense of commitment to a cause is what binds people together for transformative change and ongoing stewardship. After all, the vision of Making Connections is not only to solve discrete problems, but also to establish a basis for self-governance that enables residents in tough neighborhoods to “turn the curve” for sustained success.¹⁰

In sum, community is the foundation of a CCxSC practice; as discussed below, this has a number of practical implications for programs designed to apply CCxSC approaches.

* * *

3. OPPORTUNITIES FOR MORE SYSTEMIC APPLICATION OF CCxSC APPROACHES IN THE MAKING CONNECTIONS PROGRAM

Introduction

There is strong agreement about the power of the CCxSC approach among AECF Making Connections staff at national and local levels, but evidence suggests that the application of CC, relative to its potential, is inconsistent and incremental. Because we did not conduct a comprehensive review of CC applications, the evidence here is limited and the findings are tentative at best. But what we have seen and heard from a variety of sources and conversations has been highly consistent, and this adds weight to the findings. In any case, the purpose of this report is not to provide a conclusive evaluation, but rather to offer external observations from a community-of-practice perspective that support ongoing renewal of the Making Connections program and others sponsored by AECF.

Indications from the evidence—both archival and from conversations with staff—highlight a number of opportunities for enhancing CCxSC applications. The evidence is presented below in categories defined in terms of the core elements of an overall CCxSC approach.

Core elements of an overall CCxSC approach include: Conceptual Clarity, Methodologies, Measurement, LME Criteria, Learning Exchanges, Funding Allocations, Leadership Roles, Staff Development, and Program Design. These elements constitute a complex system of interdependent components that are essential to a CCxSC capability. The systemic nature of a composite CCxSC capability is apparent in the descriptions of the elements. This interrelatedness means that weaknesses in one element will cause problems in others. For example, the ambiguity of concepts about engagement makes it more difficult to create and

¹⁰ It is beyond the scope of this report to provide a more extended analysis of results teams as a type of hybrid community of practice. For descriptions of the canonical distinctions between teams and communities of practice as well as a conceptual model of a hybrid, called a “stewardship community,” see Figures A17-18. Essentially, teams differ from communities because their goals are primarily about performance, not learning and connecting; roles, participation levels, and task-oriented processes are formally prescribed versus self- and group-determined; and members are accountable to external agents for performance results versus primarily to themselves for knowledge-based outcomes. (Some communities choose to commit to stakeholder needs; the key is that it is their choice.) See also E. Wenger and W.M. Snyder, “Communities of Practice: The Organizational Frontier,” *Harvard Business Review*, Jan-Feb, 2000.

share insights and methods; incomplete measures make these initiatives harder to fund, which in turn makes it less likely participants will get sufficient training and support; and these various mutually reinforcing deficiencies reduce the likelihood of attaining sustainable results. Conceptual clarity, the first element in the list, is particularly important because provides a foundation for all the others. As this section will demonstrate, the fuzziness of CCxSC concepts translates into design gaps in a variety of MC tools and methods. Of course, a practical implication of these interdependencies is that isolated adjustments will not achieve expected benefits without corresponding ones in related areas; for example, changes in LME criteria depend on clearer TOC concepts and compatible measures; and introducing new CCxSC methodologies will require staff development, ideally through an enhanced mix of Learning Exchange activities.

Taken as a whole, the elements of the CCxSC system have a pervasive influence on participants' collective ability to achieve sustained results. These elements influence what people think, feel, and do. And because they operate as a dynamic interdependent system, they must be addressed as such, not as stand-alone elements.

The CCxSC system elements could be defined and categorized a number of ways; in fact, the definitions here have mostly been derived from aspects of the MC program itself, not deduced from a particular organization-design model (though the categories align with typical frameworks that feature elements such as strategies, structures, skills, and others). One benefit of this approach is that it is easier to translate insights into practical program interventions. The definition of categories is not a trivial point. An established model of system elements helps make comparisons across programs and facilitates analysis of what is working well and why; these findings can inform program adjustments and new program designs.

The evidence suggests that Providence is not the only Making Connections site where there are opportunities for enhanced CC applications as part of an overall CCxSC approach. (In fact, Providence may be ahead of many sites in this area.) Even the most successful sites could benefit—both in terms of immediate results and long-term sustainability—from more attention to building collaborative capacity. Archival materials—reports, frameworks, and instruments—point out areas where enhancements in infrastructure elements of the MC program (such as methodologies and staff development) can improve program results. In fact, all the elements addressed in this section are part of a shared MC corporate infrastructure that serves site-level initiatives nationwide. (Section 4 will argue that other AECF programs could also benefit from more systematic application of the CCxSC approach.)

In sum, findings suggest there is much room for enhanced application of CCxSC for promoting step-change improvements in results—expanding over time along dimensions of scope (issues), scale (site-level and new sites), and sustainability (of both core capabilities and results for kids and families).

The following points provide a preview of some of the action implications that this CCxSC system analysis suggests:

- A. *Clarify terms and concepts* and related frameworks associated with the CCxSC theory of change (pp. 18-21)

- B. Help results teams *apply CCxSC tools and methods* more systematically to foster teams' effectiveness and development (pp. 21-23)
- C. *Enhance quantitative measures* with qualitative, story-based evidence that aligns with the TOC and reinforces participants' involvement and commitment (23-28)
- D. *Develop LME criteria* that fit the CCxSC approach more thoroughly and consistently (pp. 28-30)
- E. *Organize learning exchanges* to provide more informal time for peer-to-peer interactions (pp. 30-34)
- F. *Adjust funding allocations* to provide increased staff time and skill-building related to CCxSC (p. 35)
- G. *Specify leadership functions* more clearly and provide increased development opportunities (pp. 35-38)
- H. *Specify staff roles* more clearly and provide increased development opportunities (pp. 38-39)
- I. *Design programs* to integrate and leverage CCxSC capabilities for better results (39-41)

A. Clarifying terms and concepts

Clarifying terms is not merely a semantic issue, but rather a more fundamental challenge to define basic concepts and hypotheses more clearly and systematically. And this conceptual clarity is important because it lays the foundation for identifying problems, building skills, developing tools and methodologies, and defining program strategies. In various AECF reports and instruments there are references to notions that are consistent with collaborative capacity, such as resident engagement, partnership, and social networks. But these terms are sometimes used in confusing or contradictory ways. AECF can strengthen its collaborative efforts by clarifying these terms and how they interrelate in a useful logic model or theory of change.

AECF staff acknowledge that the Making Connections program has involved a great deal of learning on the job, and in fact, this was an explicit expectation from the beginning. A key goal of the initiative has been to address intractable problems and create new knowledge by trying innovative, untested approaches in some of the most challenging neighborhoods in the country. (As one way to address the uncertainty involved, the program built in a leading-edge capacity for analyzing results and generating insights for improving methods and outcomes over time. The Learning Exchanges, Local Learning Partnerships (LLP), Technical Assistance Resource Centers (TARC), and associated measurement systems and data-bases are elements of this action-research capability—as are external reports such as this one.)

Making Connections participants' growing understanding of issues related to "engagement" is evidence of AECF's experience-based learning process. Recent statements by AECF staff reflect the sense that there is an opportunity now to be more definitive about what is working and what is not. As one senior staff member said about the CC approach, "We need to take what we've done intuitively and make it coherent." In contrast to the relative clarity regarding content-oriented research and practice (in areas such as health and education for kids and families); the CC-related work in MC and other programs was characterized in an internal report as "organic, broad-ranging, and amorphous." This fuzziness is an indication of the emergent status of this work.

Definitions of terms—conceptual and operational

AECF staff and MC materials use a number of terms related to collaboration. While this attention reflects its strategic importance, the effect is undermined by the sometimes unclear and inconsistent ways in which CC-related terms are used. For example, in AECF reports and instruments, “resident engagement” sometimes includes “partners,” and sometimes not; “partnerships” sometimes include residents, sometimes not; partnerships are defined sometimes as multi-level and sometimes as multi-sector (including business, higher-education, and faith sectors as well as non-profits and government agencies), and sometimes not; also it is not clear to what extent engaging residents and partners together is seen as both crucial and synergistic.

The catholic definition of collaborative capacity contrasts with more parochial definitions of engagement and partnership. As one participant said, “We have not been articulating a broadly collaborative approach; we’ve been thinking mainly in terms of residents.” A more inclusive CC lens reveals the contradictions in current definitions because it consistently defines engagement as involving all relevant players, including residents, partners, policy makers, funders, and others. MC internal reports acknowledge that its multi-dimensional nature makes engagement “more complicated than giving neighborhood residents a place at the table and honoring their voice; it requires working in new ways with new partners and developing new capacities.”

Each of the two dimensions of engagement—related to both residents and partners—merits further definition and development. For example, the term “resident engagement” is often used generically without defining characteristics or standards. The resident engagement concept could be made more operational (for both practice and assessment) by specifying relevant factors such as: strength of relationships; levels and types of common values; understanding of the issues; degree of agreement on priorities; tenure (a three-year resident-turnover rate of 50% is common in MC neighborhoods); communication and collaboration skills; time, talent, and motivation for involvement (among individuals or sub-groups); and not least, alignment of residents’ “authentic demands” with AECF program priorities. As an illustration of why it is helpful to specify the characteristics of resident engagement, consider this last point on alignment: What if residents believe housing or public safety should receive attention equivalent to what is given to children’s education and family income? One internal report summarized this concern by asking about AECF’s expectations for “[residents to] align with...[AECF’s] overarching goals and strategies....”

For organizational partnerships (aka partner engagement), there are also a number of definitional distinctions to consider, for example:

- Is it sufficient to engage in multiple parallel (or “one-off”) agreements to meet the standard of “partnership”? Or does partnership entail multi-lateral collaboration among diverse parties? If both, is there a preference? (See Figure A19 for an example of an array of partners involved in a healthcare initiative.)
- Research in this area discriminates types of multilateral engagement along a number of dimensions: level (information-sharing, coordination, cooperation, collaboration); quality (extent of trust and reciprocity); potential (synergies,

capabilities, influence); alignment (values and goals); and purpose (advocacy, transactions, learning, action)¹¹

- Do collaborative partnership initiatives actively engage players from the “grassroots and grasstops”; that is, residents and partners in neighborhoods along with policy makers and funders? (I do not have enough information to know, but it seems that AECF keeps separate its initiatives for community development and policy advocacy.)

Conceptual ambiguity regarding relationships among residents and representatives of partner organizations

In some cases resident engagement is positioned as countervailing force against potential organizational partners (such as local non-profit organizations, city agencies, legislative bodies, and businesses). For example, AECF participants reflecting on community-organizing experiences stated: “Ultimately, they [residents] were the ones who had to stand up and reject the status quo”; “[resident] mobilization appears adversarial”; and:[It is] expected that resident[s]...will play a pivotal role in...hold[ing] partners accountable to better results....” These passages suggest a bias for residents over partners, which is certainly a legitimate choice. From a CC perspective, however, this raises a question about whether there ought to be an even stronger bias for combined resident-partner collaboration.

When phrases such as “help people help themselves” and “devolving decision-making authority to people on the ground in communities” are used, it is unclear whether these are referring to residents alone or to alliances of residents and local partners. The descriptions in a number of MC instruments and reports tend to focus on resident engagement. From a CCxSC perspective, MC documents can be more definitive about AECF’s stance on a theory of change that asserts a preference for engaging residents together with diverse partners in collaborative processes and multi-stakeholder structural arrangements.¹²

When concepts related to collaborative capacity—such as resident- and partner-engagement (or resident-partner engagement)—are not clearly and consistently defined, this ambiguity is manifested in strategies, tools, measures, workshops, and other elements of an overall program design. Although deep expertise in the practice of collaboration is, as one participant stated, “more art than science,” it is nevertheless important to establish a foundation of conceptual clarity and practical guidance where possible.

Building new models

While the analysis in this section has focused on clarifying terms related to the players involved in CCxSC initiatives, another dimension merits attention: the interplay between learning and doing; and between capacity-building and problem-solving. As discussed in Sections 1 and 2, community-of-practice research and experience provides a number of tools and frameworks that address issues related to both connecting and learning.

¹¹ Cf. Himmelman, A.T. op. cit; Lindholm, M., Ryan, D., Brodsky, A. & Saxe, L., 2005. “Why Is It So Difficult to Form Effective Community Coalitions,” *City & Community*, 2005: 4:3, September; Lasker, R.D., Weiss, E.S. & Miller, R., 2001. “Partnership Synergy: A Practical Framework for Studying and Strengthening the Collaborative Advantage,” *The Milbank Quarterly*, 2001: 79: 2; Renz, D. O., “Reframing Governance,” *Non-Profit Quarterly*, Winter, 2006.

¹² In a presentation of work done in collaboration with the Skillman Foundation in Detroit, AECF frames the interrelationships of partners, stakeholders, and families by placing them in a set of concentric circles in which all players are characterized as “residents” (see Figure A19a).

Examples include who to involve and how as well as how to design action-learning activities that build capacity while solving specific problems. Community-of-practice frameworks can thus help address conceptual ambiguities related to participation while also highlighting the action-learning dimension of engagement.

Recent insights related to the findings reported here have already had some effect. Several months after reviewing the initial report on CCxSC in Providence, participants stated that the conversations had encouraged their collaborative-capacity efforts: “In the past, resident leaders were not as involved; this helped us invest more in capacity versus a sole focus on ‘programs-for-results.’” Additional efforts to engage partners along with residents were also initiated.

Summary

AECF distinguishes itself by “leading with ideas”; this analysis highlights opportunities to become more rigorous about ideas related to CCxSC, as a basis for translating them into practical tools and methods that can improve results. The meaning of collaboration—who is engaged and how—is important to establish as a conceptual anchor for a broader CCxSC theory of change. A clearer, more systemic and inclusive framework highlights potential synergies along multiple dimensions: residents and partners, grassroots and grasstops, collaboration and strategy, and learning and action. Finally, early reports from practitioners suggest that community-of-practice concepts and frameworks can help towards increasing our understanding of CCxSC ideas and putting them into practice.

B. Methods/Practice Repertoire

A practice of any kind includes a rich repertoire of elements that reflect tacit as well as explicit aspects of expertise—art as well as science—that are inherent in any discipline. Twinned practice elements that reflect *codifiable* as well as *non-codifiable* characteristics include (respectively): concepts as well as intuitions; basic skills and artistry; procedures and rules of thumb; methods and work-arounds; standards and judgments; case studies and stories; certification and peer acknowledgement; tools and improvisations; and rule-bound implementation as well as playful innovation. All these elements are crucial to mastery. Given the richness of a typical repertoire, achieving expertise in any field generally takes ten years or more—whether it is playing an instrument, fixing cars, knitting clothes, engineering software, or organizing communities. This is why it is so important to create opportunities for practitioners to learn and work together over time, in activities ranging from formal workshops and assessments to informal mentoring and story-telling. This ecology of diverse relationships and interactions help practitioners learn the nuanced elements of the practice that are hard to explain as well as ones that are more codifiable.

There are typical signs that a practice is in an early or transitional stage, such as: ambiguous terms; a divergent or undeveloped array of skills and methods; limited opportunities for training and apprenticeship; weak relationships among practitioners; and low levels of public legitimacy. Practices often evolve from home-grown, idiosyncratic beginnings through stages of convergence, formalization, and mainstream legitimacy—largely as a result of a concomitant evolution of the community of practitioners. As practitioners get experience and get to know each other, they trade stories, ideas, and techniques; and over time develop standards of practice and a shared language to facilitate

learning and innovation. Website design, medical bioinformatics, and certified organic farming are examples of practices that have grown quickly in the last two decades, spurred by strong communities of practitioners helping each other learn, innovate, and grow their field. Practice-development depends on community-development.

Many of the methods applied in the MC context today are not yet well enough defined to know whether they are working, why, and under what conditions. In some cases this lack of rigor has held back progress in sites. For example, early efforts to organize residents and local non-profits in Providence used community-organizing methods that increased antagonisms rather than mobilizing players to work together for common goals. The resulting hard feelings, disappointments, and distrust held back progress in subsequent years. More recently, when practitioners leading successful initiatives were asked to explain how they engage residents and partners, typical responses were: “We just do it” or “It’s more art than science...” Collaborative engagement certainly is more art than science and always will be, but amidst the “just doing,” there may ripe opportunities to define and diffuse the more codifiable components.

As in heart surgery, rock climbing, and high-finance, in community-organizing there are considerable risks if practitioners lack competence. In a site with several neighborhoods, effective CCxSC can make a big difference for thousands of people: whether they stay healthy or suffer serious illnesses; succeed or fail in school; make a living wage or live on the edge; or worse, turn to illicit sources of income and end up in prison. The stakes are high, and when community-organizing is done ineffectively, opportunities are lost and disappointments make it only harder to try again.

From a community-of-practice perspective, a way to frame the practice-development challenge is to consider both tacit and codifiable elements as well as an overall approach that combines methods as conditions require. Elements to consider include:

- Tacit “situated” capabilities that promote success, such as relationships with key players as well as local language skills and cultural competence
- Codifiable tools and frameworks for coalescing ad-hoc networks into communities, such as social network analysis and community-of-practice methods; others include Alinsky’s “power building” model, open-space planning, and whole-system organizing.¹³ (Even highly codified methods, of course, require related tacit skills that are crucial to successful application.)
- Combinations of complementary methods—good-cop and bad-cop; grassroots and grasstops—that can support community-organizing efforts by bringing isolated or entrenched parties together and help them engage productively. Options include campaigns, lawsuits, and boycotts (“bad cop”) as well as research and education, multi-stakeholder dialogue, and social networking (“good cop”). (See Figure A20.) These complementary methods are particularly important because they can shape important contextual factors that influence

¹³ See Tables A1a-b for examples of CC-related methods used today. AECF has experience with methods associated with a number of organizations, including: African-American civil rights movement, Alinsky’s power-building model, Pacific Institute for Community Organization, Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now, Freire (faith-based approaches), Crusade for Justice, Industrial Areas Foundation, Communities Organized for Public Service, Consensus Organizing Institute, Metro Organizations for People, and National Community Building Network.

practice conditions. Lawsuits and boycotts for example, or even just the threat of them, can bring parties to the table and make it more likely they will negotiate in good faith. Research and education efforts can build shared understanding among long-standing opponents.

- A major issue raised by participants in Providence and among AECF staff in headquarters addressed not only methodological rigor but the balance of methods applied, particularly between ones associated with either CC or SC. Questions raised included the following:
 - How well have we prioritized the mix, timing, and relative emphasis of activities related to strategic clarity and collaborative capacity?
 - Where are we developmentally in our work here? How ready are residents and partners to steward the initiatives going forward?

Finally, just as conceptual clarity is important as a foundation for a CCxSC approach, a comprehensive framework of relevant methodologies is essential for an advanced practice. Such a framework posits basic conceptual dimensions of the practice independent of particular brand-name approaches; it identifies situational contingencies and combination opportunities; and it provides a structure for comparing methods and evaluating innovations.

C. Measures

Key questions regarding measures in any context include why, what, how, and for whom to measure. Another issue is cost—or better said, return on investment: Does the pay-off of measurement expenditures match the cost-benefit ratio of alternative investments (say, increased time and coaching for community coordinators)? AECF distinguishes itself in the field by its abilities to manage performance, learn from experience, and improve results over time. A brief look at a survey assessment (with behavioral anchors serving as indicators of development) suggests that the MC measurement approach is well-aligned with the program’s intent to promote collaboration among local residents and partners. Improvement opportunities to explore include clarifying terms (cf. Section 3A) and further integrating qualitative and quantitative approaches. The survey instrument, “Indicators for Revised Making Connections Site Summary Assessment (Attachment A, Draft, 11.29.06),” assesses sites in three overall areas with several sub-elements in each:

1. Results and Strategies
 - a. Effectiveness and Comprehensiveness of Strategies (Scope)
 - b. Systems and Policy Reform (Scale)
 - c. Co-investment in each strategy (Leverage)
2. Management
 - a. Management of The Initiative
 - b. Effective Communications
3. Sustainability
 - a. Authentic Demand from Residents
 - b. Alliance of Partners and Champions
 - c. Strong Leadership to Sustain the Work
 - d. Development of Local Management Entity
 - e. Adequate Resources to Sustain the Work (Public, Private, Philanthropic)

Observations of the MC assessment instrument from a CC perspective:

- The assessment elements cover issues related to both strategic clarity and collaborative capacity. Strategic clarity items include all three “Results and Strategies” elements, and Collaborative Capacity items include “Authentic Demand from Residents” and “Alliance of Partners and Champions.” The “Management” items, as the term implies, are more about a conventional, organizational approach.¹⁴
 - The management category does not indicate who will manage: multi-lateral alliances that include residents and partners, for example, or a presiding “management entity” with privileged decision-making authority regarding strategies and adjustments based on results (or a combination of these).
- For every category, the higher scores (10-15) emphasize greater involvement and ownership by local residents and partners. For example, for “Systems and Policy Reform,” lower scores involve simply identifying and analyzing current policies or designing them “with potential influence on partners in mind.” Higher scores mean active collaboration with policy partner(s) and “strategies [that] are supported or incorporated by many system partners and/or ... funders.”
 - Although the emphasis on resident involvement and partnership is clear for all elements on the survey, the wording on items in the “Results and Strategies” and “Management” sections does not necessarily indicate that diverse, multi-lateral alliances or partnerships are involved. For example, site strategies can be supported by “many system partners” as separate one-off players working in parallel, or as an ongoing alliance in which these partners are working jointly; local partners may establish “dedicated reliable funding streams,” but they could do this independently rather than via a pooled funding mechanism.
- The “Sustainability” section—with items on “Authentic Demand from Residents” and “Alliance of Partners and Champions”—includes factors that directly address the extent of multi-lateral CC structures. It also explicitly assesses the extent to which sites have established formal structures for shared stewardship as opposed to occasional joint activities. For example, the lowest score involves partners that “come together to identify local needs” but the highest scores involve collaboration that is “routine and supported by a stable infrastructure” and involvement “as part of the Local Management Entity infrastructure.”
 - Without more information than provided here, the phrase “part of the [LME] infrastructure” suggests that the LME may be constituted in part by a resident-partner alliance; (though the possibility remains that the entity is a conventional service organization).
 - Given the concerns raised in Section 3A on clarifying terms and concepts, it is interesting to note that on the one hand, the Sustainability section’s two sub-categories differentiate “authentic demand from

¹⁴ Note that the CCxSC TOC does not highlight conventional management skills—such as project management or managing a budget—but rather treats them as implicit. Though these skills are important, they are generally more accessible and better understood than skills for crafting collective civic strategies and nurturing collaborative relationships among diverse stakeholders. Moreover, with strategic clarity and collaborative capacity in place, managing projects, budgets, and staff is much more straightforward.

residents” from “alliance of partners and champions,” while on the other hand, they reinforce the inclusion of both residents and partners in effective alliances: For all ratings (1-15) in both sub-categories, the term “partners” is modified to be “partners (including residents).”

- The stage titles (there are five stages of development) evolve from “initial needs and capacity assessment” through “building demand for change,” “piloting,” and “expanding strategies,” to Stage 5, “sustaining effective approaches and closing gaps in results.” The Stage 5 title heading suggests an emphasis on strategic clarity more than collaborative capacity. Yet the associated behavioral-anchor descriptions generally involve broad participation and ownership by residents and partners, which reflects the importance of collaborative capacity. This may be a semantic quibble, but it would help reinforce the CC dimension of the CCxSC TOC by amending the Stage 5 title to read “Sustaining *Collaborative* Approaches and Closing Gaps in Results.” (Thus making the adjective “effective” implicit and making “collaborative” explicit—a nuanced shift perhaps, but one that heightens the visibility of the CC principle.)
- Finally, for a more complete assessment of CCxSC at the site level, it would be helpful to include a standardized assessment of relevant contextual factors. Such data can help participants understand better how to assess sites’ readiness for investments and the types of interventions that would best promote collaborative action for getting both near-term and sustained results. Contextual factors may include demographics, civic norms, local policies, relationships among local institutions, urgent priorities, and others. (This data may already be captured and discussed in AECF’s written assessment reports and interactive review sessions.)

Complementary qualitative approach

As indicated above, the survey assessment captures data on both CC and SC, and it emphasizes the importance of CC across key elements related to strategy and sustainability. The instrument implicitly addresses the conceptual fuzziness about resident involvement in partnerships by including separate resident and partner dimensions while also including residents (albeit parenthetically) within the partner dimension (a solution that reflects the evolving understanding of this work).

MC site assessments are reviewed during interactive discussions that include local participants as well as AECF staff. This allows for collaborative interpretation of the results and integration of quantitative scores with qualitative data (such as mini-cases and participant stories). Qualitative data is particularly important for research on social phenomena, and in this case can correct for instances where the ambiguity of CCxSC terms may limit the validity of numerical scores based on them.

CC phenomena are by nature too complex to capture via survey and archival data alone. Such methods do not capture data that are sufficiently rich to account for contextual factors and causal relationships.¹⁵ Another vulnerability of quantitative measures—

¹⁵ John Van Maanan (*Tales of the Field*, 1988) has been widely cited in the social sciences for his advocacy of ethnographic methods because they are necessary to capture “thick descriptions” of phenomena, which is required to represent the complex web of factors involved in social systems.

particularly in the context of a program based on collaboration principles—is that study “subjects” may feel as though they are being observed primarily for external evaluation or research, rather than for their own learning, even when sponsors clearly assert that the latter is the main intent. (This concern is alleviated, of course, if subjects participate in the design of research objectives and methods.)

The risks of faulty analysis based on data generated by highly specified instruments are greater in complex, dynamic situations. Instrument scores can indicate a false sense of rigor because they reduce complex phenomena to standardized behavioral anchors, and they often do not ensure that raters interpret categories reliably. Moreover, because established mindsets are embedded in survey instrument designs, program leaders and participants often learn more about what they already know, versus about unforeseen problems and possibilities.

The CCxSC logic model can be used to create a story-based measurement approach that complements a survey instrument and opens up the lens for making new discoveries. The CCxSC TOC provides a template on which to hang qualitative data that links program activities and results. As an illustration, the template was used to frame a story about how resident involvement produced better results for kids.¹⁶ “Systematic anecdotal evidence” (aka qualitative, case-study research) can help establish causal links indicated by regression analyses and data correlations (see Figure 6 below; also Box A2).¹⁷

The CCxSC logic model in action: Connecting and learning drive strategies that get results

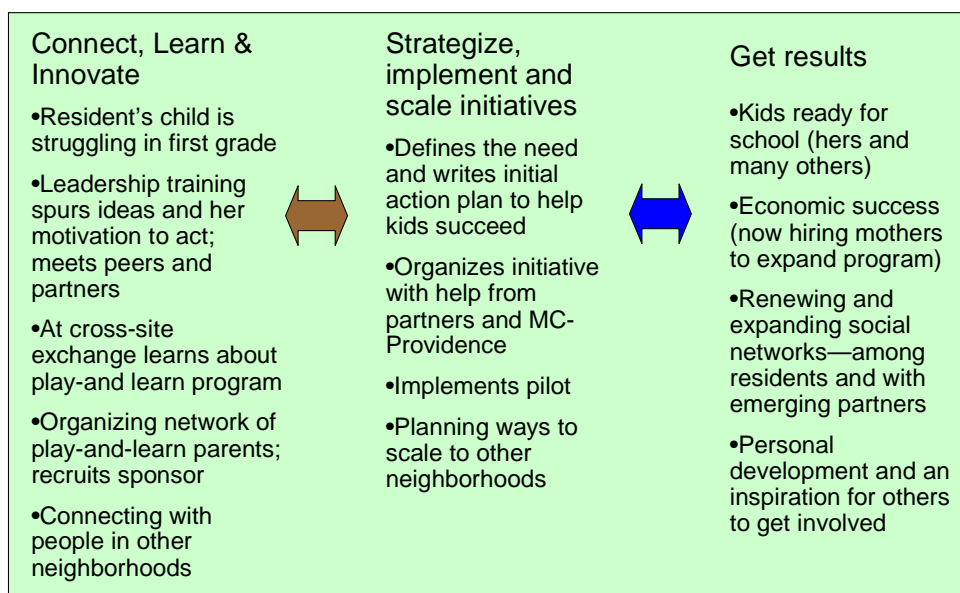


Figure 6. Anecdotal evidence of CCxSC displayed on the TOC template (cf. Figure 2.)

¹⁶ A noteworthy point about this story: It all started with a mother's concern about her child; an example of truly “authentic demand.”

¹⁷ This “systematic anecdotal” measurement approach is often used by communities of practice to assess contributions to practitioners and stakeholders. (See Chapter 8, “Measurement and Management,” in *Cultivating Communities of Practice*, op. cit.) Additional methods for capturing and displaying qualitative and action-research evidence have opened up as more researchers (and “subjects”) are using video, theater, virtual environments, and others.

Well-structured anecdotal evidence not only shows what is working (or not), but also provides contextual information to describe how and why it is working. Moreover, stories spur insights, while they also reinforce success by celebrating accomplishments and recognizing particular participants. Even the process of story collection itself—which can and should be done with participants—motivates, educates (learning by telling), and engages. It is a heterarchical approach that is less controlled by external evaluators and provides disintermediated, plain-spoken, practical, real-time feedback to participants.

Stories need not and should not stand on their own. In fact, survey and archival data become much more valuable when used in concert with stories. On the one hand, stories help delineate causal relationships in light of contextual factors; on the other hand, survey responses and archival data can test how representative the stories are, and they can validate (or disconfirm) the degree to which interventions are achieving results.

In the MC context, for example, surveys can test expectations about how well MCLI (Making Connections Leadership Institute) training prepares graduates for subsequent leadership roles and participation in results teams. Archival data can complement qualitative data in several ways: identify the number of residents and partner representatives who went through MCLI training and what percentage subsequently participated in a results team; ascertain the level, diversity, and continuity of partners' participation in results teams; and show the ultimate pay-off by drawing correlations between participation in results-teams and targeted outcomes.

In addition to quantitative and qualitative approaches, an “action-research” approach can be used to reinforce the value of making explicit, action-oriented experiments to achieve better results. Pilot interventions, such as the application of a new community-organizing technique or doubling funds to staff resident-partner engagement activities, could be conducted. This approach contrasts with measures that can only assess established program approaches. An action-research frame encourages opportunistic interventions and experiments, while inviting rigorous measurement—quantitative and qualitative—to assess results and help disseminate lessons learned.¹⁸

Return on investment (ROI) of data

Because measurement is expensive, it is important to measure its costs and benefits. The ROI calculations of course depend on the needs and interests of those evaluating the measures. What are ways to evaluate how useful data has been for the various intended beneficiaries of the reports based on them? What are indicators of the validity and generalizability of the data and results? Do they measure phenomena accurately and are results relevant across sites and programs? To what extent is the assessment approach providing opportunities for participants to learn and to celebrate the work during the

¹⁸ Advocates of action research—including Kurt Lewin, Chris Argyris, and West Churchman—argue that measuring only what exists may mistakenly conclude that current conditions cannot be changed by doing something new. Thus Lewin did not set out to address racism by studying correlations based on observations of the current state; he designed experiments to see if he could *change* attitudes and used rigorous research to test his action-oriented hypotheses. (See *Action Science*, C. Argyris, R. Putnam & D. McLain-Smith, 1985.)

process of data-collection, not only in post-hoc program reviews? How assess the relative value of money spent on assessments versus alternatives—such as increased investments to build collaboration skills or mini-grants that promote the vitality of local alliances? Bottom-line, are measurement activities helping participants achieve desired outcomes in ways that are commensurate with their costs (in terms of both staff attention and resources)?

In group conversations, AECF staff mentioned concerns about the “need to recast messaging expectations about data” and to learn how to “make it something the community wants to embrace and support going forward.” These concerns reinforce the importance of evaluating the ROI of current measures in terms of costs and benefits for residents and partners as well as sponsors, particularly because the investments in measures are so high and there are compelling alternative uses for those funds.

In sum, the Making Connections Site Summary Assessment seems to strongly align with an emphasis on both CC and SC. Suggested improvements include clarifying whether multi-lateral (vs. one-off) partnerships are essential for higher scores on survey items related to strategy-making and management. The value of survey results generally is enhanced by complementing them with stories that are captured in ways that align with the CCxSC TOC framework. Further, the process of evaluating the ROI of measures, compared with alternative program investments, should be transparent for all participants. Finally, the effectiveness of such assessments, and their ROI, will depend largely on who is involved and how during processes for collecting data, interpreting findings, and designing responses to build capabilities for improving results.

D. Local Management Entity Criteria

The selection criteria for “Local Management Entities” (LME), as described in the document “Developing Local Management Entities (05.24.07),” strongly emphasize resident engagement and associated processes, but pay relatively little attention to partner collaboration. Partner engagement is generally assumed to be already in place, and references to it do not specify whether partners participate in the program collectively or as independent agents. The conceptual fuzziness about engagement described in Section 3A—regarding the respective roles and interactions among residents and organizational partners—is thus manifested in the LME document.

Although it is implicit throughout, collaborative capacity—defined as residents and partners working and learning together for the common good (cf. definition in Section 1, p. 5)—is not highlighted as a key issue in the LME document or business plan:

- Building collaborative capacity is not listed, for example, as one of the “core expectations” for LME’s, which are: “measurable results,” “central role of residents,” and “using data and learning to strengthen strategies.” These points are certainly key aspects of CCxSC—but they leave out the role of organizational partners and the importance of multi-lateral stewardship structures that include both partners and residents.
- The business plan highlights activities regarding goal-setting, funding, staffing, and evaluating (LME development document, p. 5), all of which relate to strategic

clarity. But there is nothing in the business plan overview that calls for a concerted, ongoing effort to cultivate a network of partners and residents. “Defining roles and responsibilities” with partners is mentioned, but this leaves out all the work that is required to bring together the right mix and number of players and to foster multi-lateral, collaborative relationships over time.

- There are many passages that acknowledge the importance of partners, for example: “[program implementation]...requires a broadly held commitment among all partners” (p. 5), and “...a culture committed and accountable to results requires capacity to develop powerful strategies and partnerships...” (p. 4). But these references are passing remarks about partners as success factors; they do not reflect the need to assess how the LME will bring partners to the table in the first place (a major hurdle in itself, not to mention what it takes to keep them there as productive participants). Again, the LME document does not provide assessment criteria for partner-development activity.
- The closest the document comes to highlighting collaborative capacity is an item titled: “Mobilize and coordinate broad-based alliances...” But this statement mainly states that “most sites already work with groups of partners” (p. 4). It does not indicate an expectation for ongoing cultivation of partners—along with residents—as players that are essential to an overall collaborative capacity.

In contrast to passing references about partner involvement, resident engagement is asserted as a fundamental expectation. For example:

- “LME’s ... [are] asked to continue and expand [resident-engagement] strategies as a central element of the work....[It is] expected that resident leadership, engagement and community organizing efforts will play a pivotal role in site strategies ...to hold partners accountable to better results...” (p. 5). (Note the implicit opposition of residents and partners in this passage; though to confuse matters a bit, there is an earlier passage that talks about “[engaging] residents *as* partners” (p. 4, my emphasis).)

The document states that AECF will “transition management responsibility to a local organization, supported by an array of *“already strong organizational partners and residents”* (my emphasis). But it is likely that the strength of partner and resident support will vary significantly by site and over time, and the document does not indicate how engagement with partners and residents will be assessed (perhaps via the measurement instrument discussed in Section 3C?). Further, sustainability factors in the LME do not indicate the importance of building in partnership capacity from the start as the core CCxSC strategy for getting things done (see Figure A21). The working assumption throughout seems to be that there are “already strong organizational partners.”

This brief review of the “Developing LME’s” document reinforces points made in sections above about the contrast between an explicit, emphatic focus on resident engagement and the implicit expectation of already-involved partners who may operate more or less independently with each other and with residents. From a CC perspective, this LME development document could be improved by greater emphasis on cultivating organizational partners as well as residents. AECF and local players should be careful

not to assume there are sufficient levels of collaboration in place. Because CC is a foundation for SC, ongoing partner-development should be a key objective that is part of an overall resident-partner engagement strategy. It would be useful to conduct a scan of sites that have made the LME transition to assess the extent to which collaborative capacity exists and how instrumental it has been for success and sustainability. (A Stakeholder Engagement Matrix can be used to assess (and plan for) resident and partner engagement; it helps participants consider the current and ideal states of stakeholder relationships, related challenges, and action plans (see Figure A22).)

An instrument that more clearly incorporates CC elements makes it possible to compare LME's on CCxSC criteria—such as who is included and how—and analyze the extent to which CC makes a difference for achieving sustained results. For example, what can we learn from Providence and other sites about skills, methods, and local contextual factors that affect the development of results teams? Assessments that capture and share such information can help leverage diverse experiences and facilitate peer-to-peer learning across sites.

E. Learning Exchanges

The activities of multiple, diverse MC initiatives nationwide has provided an extraordinary opportunity for cross-site learning on what it takes to achieve significant gains for kids and families in tough neighborhoods. The MC program built in a capacity for facilitating cross-site learning from the beginning. The Learning Exchange initiative has fostered dissemination of information, methods, and skills across sites as well as among researchers, policy makers, and program leaders. This is particularly important because the issues themselves (family economic success and children ready for school) as well as the repertoire of practice elements (concepts, skills, methods, etc.) are complex, difficult, and dynamic (cf. Methods Section 3B).

Community-of-practice research and methods originated as a response to fundamental questions about how people learn and how ideas, skills, and methods diffuse across practitioners and organizations. Thus a community-of-practice lens is a particularly strong fit for an analysis of the Learning Exchanges initiative.

This analysis draws on established community-of-practice frameworks and methods. Issues it highlights include the power of informal, peer-to-peer interactions and mutual trust and reciprocity. One CoP framework describes an “ecology of learning activities” that includes many of those associated with Learning Exchanges plus others, with an emphasis on action-oriented, just-in-time learning among practitioners (see Figure 7 below).

More recent work on CoPs in large-scale initiatives such as MC has described “learning systems” that include a variety of structures and related activities—including CoPs, conventional teams, and various stakeholder organizations and constituencies. For MC, the learning system includes all activities directly involved in Learning Exchanges as well as others that promote formal and informal learning, such as annual site reviews, coaching by AECF experts, and informal back-channel conversations among practitioners across sites.

Ecology of community learning activities for practice-development & diffusion

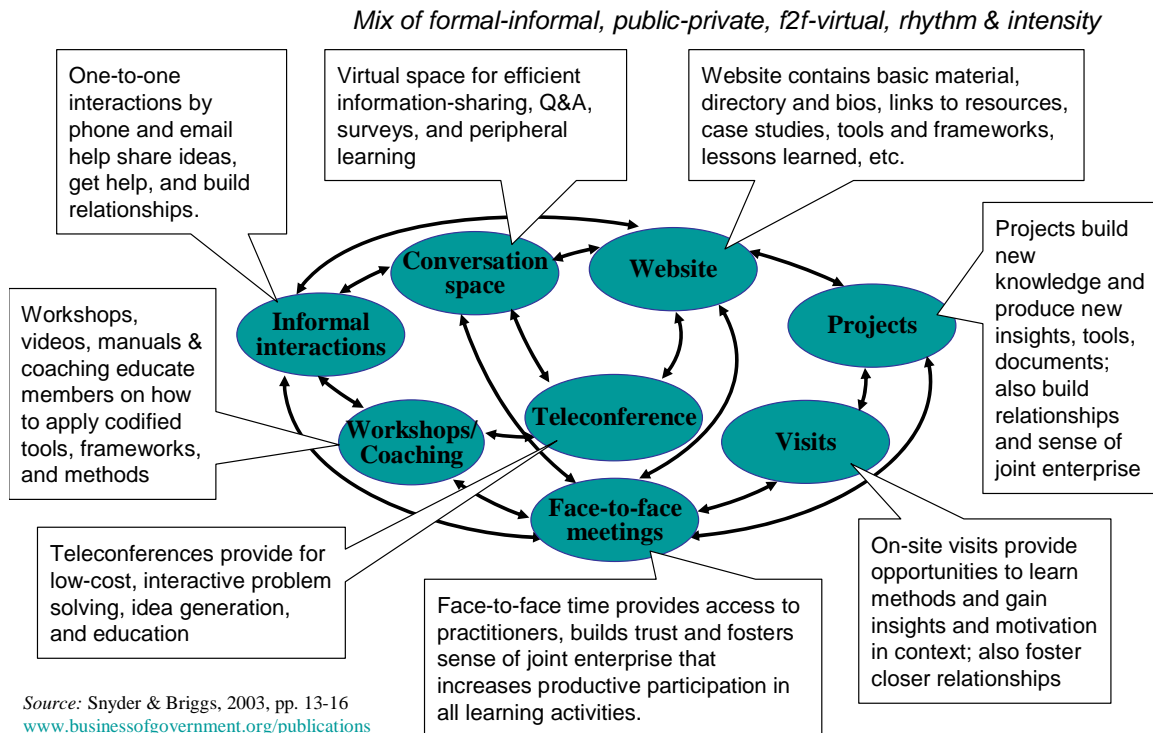
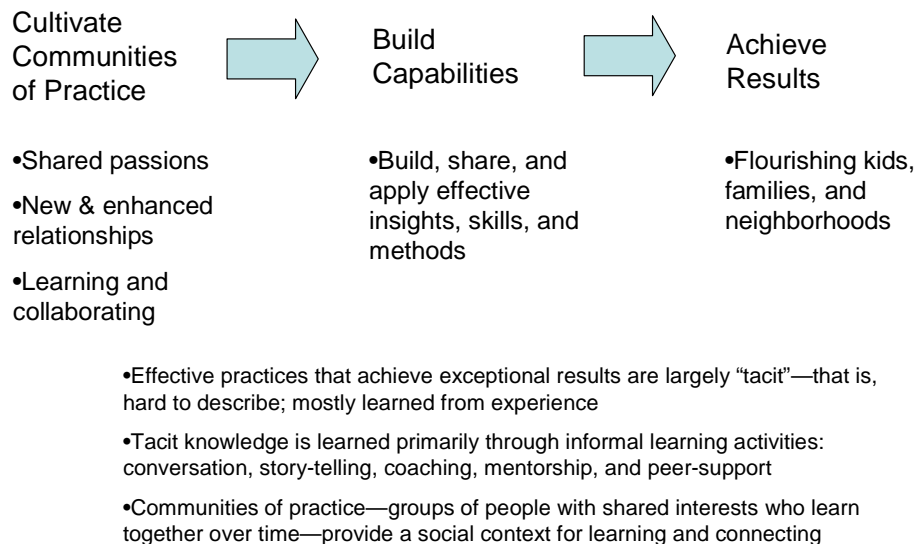


Figure 7. Ecology of community learning activities

Here is a list of basic beliefs (based on CoP research and practice) about cross-site learning that can be used to frame observations and ideas for enhancing the Learning Exchanges:

- Practitioner relationships characterized by shared passions, trust, and reciprocity are crucial for building and sharing knowledge—particularly innovative and complex approaches (see Figure 8 below).
- Skilled practice is highly tacit; as expertise increases, it is increasingly difficult to explain or transfer via conventional training or codified methodologies. (This is why workshops and conferences are often most valued for opportunities during breaks and meals to meet peers, tell stories, and share experiences.)
- Tacit knowledge takes years to learn, primarily because it depends on informal methods: learning by doing; coaching by peers as well as mentors; conversations and story-telling; and work experience under a variety of conditions.
- It is possible to intentionally foster informal learning and the social contexts that support it, but success depends on voluntary participation and internal leadership; it cannot be mandated from above or designed primarily by outsiders.
- Decades of research have demonstrated the synergies achieved by combining explicit and tacit knowledge, structured and unstructured learning, and formal and informal structures. But societal and organizational biases today disproportionately emphasize formality and codification—largely because these correspond to values associated with authority, privilege, and control; (not to mention the financial benefits to consultants, training organizations, technology providers, and conference planners who sell codified knowledge as a product or service).

Logic Model for Communities of Practice



The Logic Model provides a template for stories, testimonials, and statistics that can document the benefits of communities of practice.

For more on the relationship of formal and informal learning processes to tacit and codifiable knowledge, see “Organizational learning and performance: An exploration of the linkages between organizational learning, knowledge, and performance,” W.M. Snyder, 1996 (unpublished dissertation), pp. 26-43.

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Figure 8. Logic Model for Communities of Practice

The following observations of Learning Exchange activities are made through a CoP lens and are influenced by the assertions listed above. These brief reflections (based on limited, second-hand reports) do not recommend specific actions but rather point out areas that deserve further exploration, particularly opportunities to foster informal interactions that can complement formal activities and strengthen the overall learning experience.

- *Conferences* (in-person and on telephone):
 - There are dynamic speakers with compelling success stories
 - Most activities are designed as panel discussions or as break-outs on specified topics
 - Conference meetings and teleconferences emphasize dissemination of experts’ knowledge versus facilitating peer-to-peer exchanges (“We don’t learn enough from each other”)
 - The conference agenda are full and there is relatively little time for connecting with peers—formally or informally—on practical how-to questions
 - Site practitioners sometimes are often so overwhelmed by the amount of content (“stacks of material...”) that it is hard to figure out what is relevant for solving pressing problems; many would prefer to use face-to-face forums as opportunities to roll up their sleeves and work together on practical problems they face back home
 - Cross-site visits are especially useful for learning about innovations that are socially as well as technically complex. Visits increase motivation and

confidence and build relationships between those with experience and those who need it; they also encourage subsequent, ongoing exchanges by phone and email. But because they take time and money, site participants are hesitant to take the initiative. (“We’re free to pick up the phone, but I have to keep my head down; unfortunately we don’t reach out much to each other across sites.”)

- *The AECF online facility* (the “Knowledge Center”) provides a wealth of knowledge, including research reports, case histories, site information, toolkits, and videos of experts and leading practitioners; all of which are searchable by topics and authors. To realize their full potential, however, practitioners need help to translate documented information and tools into practice, which is not always very straightforward (“Casey has a wealth of knowledge, but it requires some effort to ‘turn the straw into gold’ so it’s useful for practitioners”).

Few practitioners working “on the ground” have the time or energy to surf around and sift through a site to find something that seems useful. CoP research has shown that many online resource facilities are grossly underutilized unless there are active communities of practitioners who vet the materials, personally recommend particular resources to peers, and make contributions of practical tools that others can use without expert translation. (See Figure A23 for a schematic illustration of a national online resource center designed to serve healthcare communities of practice at local, state, and national levels.)

- *Cross-site projects*: There is an opportunity to establish cross-site projects, co-led by teams of researchers and practitioners, which address hot topics related to CCxSC. Action-learning projects provide opportunities for practitioners to build their craft in areas where they need it most. For example, projects might focus on issues such as: “What are the key functions and skills required of a coordinator for a results team that includes diverse residents and partners? What are the CCxSC tools and methods we need in our toolkit? How best leverage population data and other types of information to guide and assess local strategies? Results of such participant-led projects could be presented in conference workshops and teleconferences and through peer-to-peer consulting.

All these learning activities can be designed to take advantage of synergies among them (cf. Figure 7, p. 31). For example, face-to-face conferences help build relationships that encourage productive participation on teleconferences. Conversations during face-to-face meetings and teleconferences can point out specific online resources that apply directly to urgent work priorities. (As one participant said, “I want just-in-time help for a problem I’m dealing with, not stacks of abstract research.”) Of course, the interdependence of learning activities can go both ways, creating either a virtuous or vicious cycle (see Figure 9 below). This is why it is essential to design a learning ecology that incorporates a balance of formal and informal learning processes. Finally, the action-learning ecology is most likely to succeed when there is an underlying sense of community among practitioners who share passions, problems, and a desire to connect with each other for motivation and support.

Learning & Connecting: How reinforce the virtuous cycle and avoid the vicious cycle?

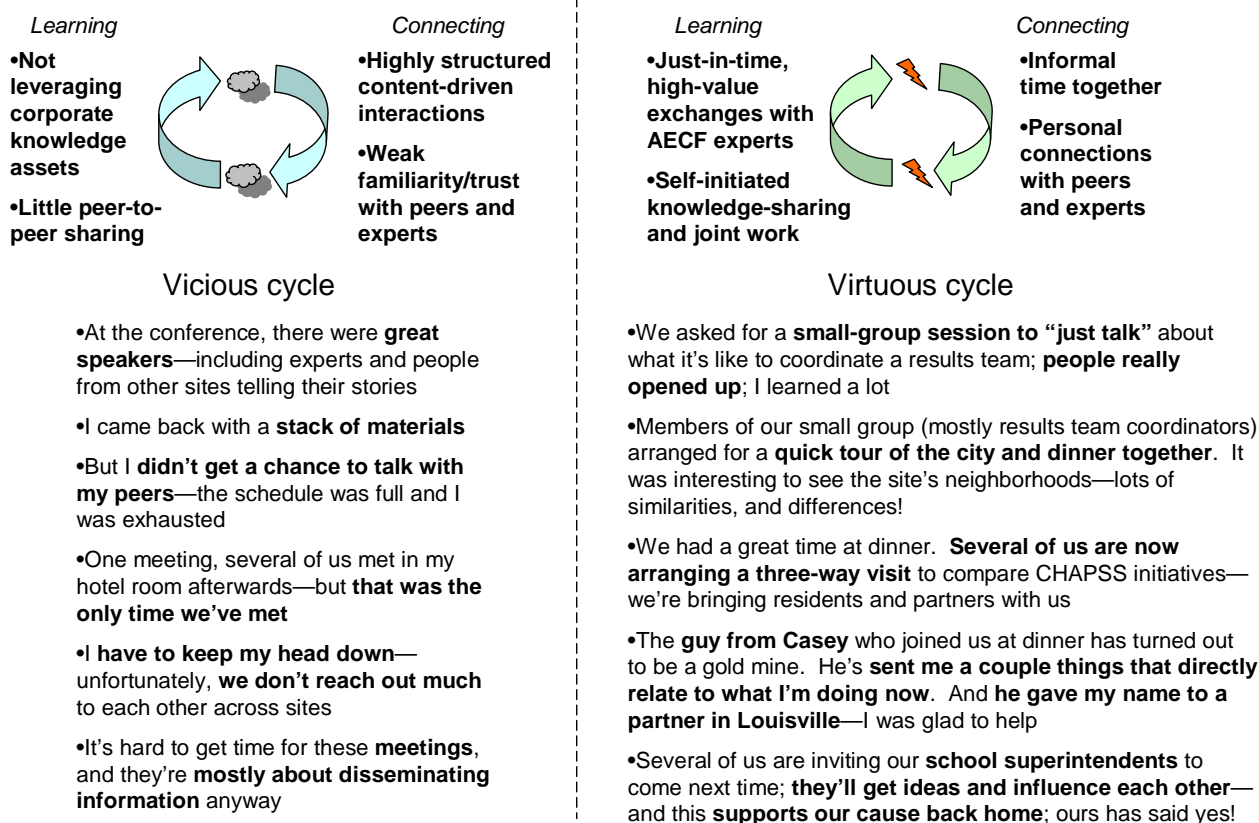


Figure 9. The importance of informal interactions for learning and collaboration across sites

In sum, priority opportunities include developing cross-site communities of practice on hot topics, enhancing and further integrating the ecology of activities (both formal and informal) in the overall MC learning system, and designing ways to involve practitioners more deeply in the design of the learning system. Analysis questions include:

- *Cross-site communities of practice*: How promote stronger relationships and increased peer-to-peer learning across sites? What are topics for cross-site communities to focus on (whether content-oriented, such as FES and CHAPPS, or process-oriented such as CCxSC methods and the role of the coordinator)?
- *Ecology of learning activities*: How enhance and further integrate the ecology of learning activities to foster innovation and diffusion of ideas and methods?
- *Practitioner design of the learning system*: How best involve participants (including site-level residents and partners as well as site-team members) as co-designers of the overall learning system and of specific elements such as conferences, teleconferences, projects, visits, and online resources? Finally, how best involve participants in evaluating the effectiveness of Learning Exchanges and other elements of the overall MC learning system (cf. approaches described in the Measures Section 3C)?

F. Funding Allocations

A program's budget categories and the amounts allocated to various line-items provide archival evidence for assessing levels of commitment for implementing CCxSC approaches. Types of investments that directly support CCxSC activities include: staff time to coordinate multi-stakeholder partnerships; training and mentoring for resident and partner leaders; initiatives proposed by multi-stakeholder results teams; travel to conferences and other sites to promote peer-to-peer learning; coaching and consulting from external experts as well as AECF staff; access to collaborative technologies and online knowledge resources; and funds for LLP, TARC, and measurement/documentation.

A review of a site-level program budget ideally involves site-based participants as well as AECF staff in a 360-degree review of the relative value of various investments, including both site-specific and overhead expenditures (cf. ROI discussion in Measurement Section 3C above). One participant noted that it took several years for AECF staff to recognize that levels of resident engagement were not high enough: “[O]nly then did we invest in capacity as much as results.” Budget reviews that include residents and partners can help quickly identify such gaps as well as appropriate responses.

The value of a budget analysis relies on the quality of data regarding program activities and outcomes as well as corresponding funding allocations. It also depends on the skills, experiences, and motivations of those involved. Meeting these requirements may entail some recruitment and training of participants, but the payoff can be well worth it. Engaging residents and partners in such an analysis can increase buy-in that leads to co-investments, both soft (staff skills, time, and attention) and hard (cash funds).

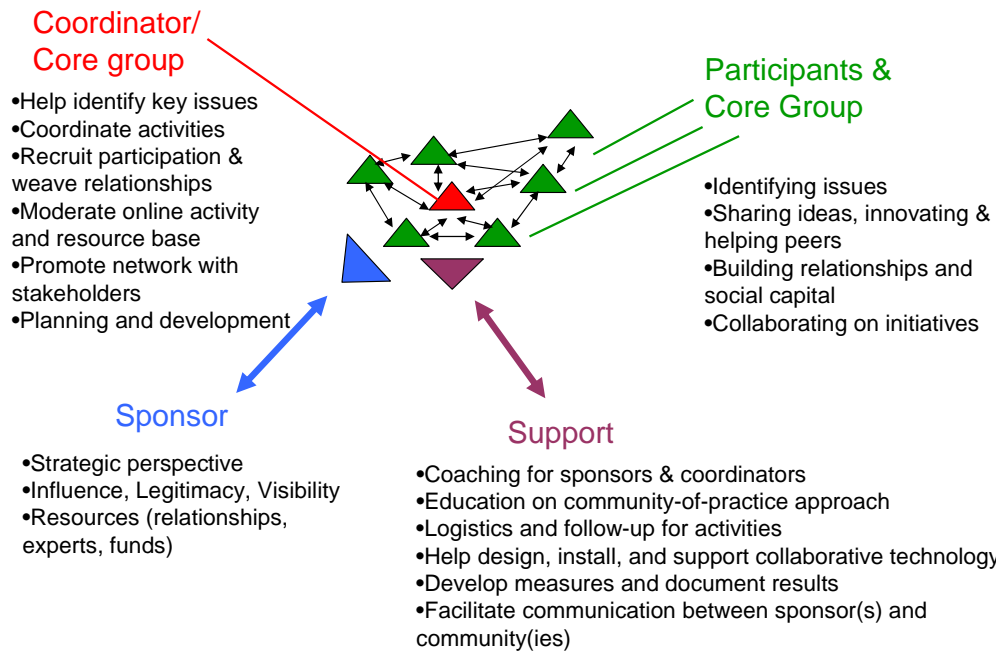
Finally, budget allocations are a stringent measure of an organization's commitment to CCxSC strategies (“follow the money...”).¹⁹ When staff and program participants view the budget through a CCxSC lens, where do they see the greatest opportunities for a return on investment? If a participative ROI budget analysis supports it, are AECF program managers and senior management ready to invest more aggressively in CC roles, processes, and structures?

G. Leadership Roles

Collaborative learning and action requires an ecology of leadership roles, including conventional ones for strategic thinking and organizing people and projects, as well as a range of others associated with a network-based, knowledge-intensive environment. Emerging roles include boundary-spanners, thought leaders, evangelists, networkers, weavers, knowledge stewards, project managers, mentors, and others. For building and leveraging collaborative capacity, all these roles are crucial and require vision, initiative, and the capacity to influence others that are essential for leadership in any context.

¹⁹ As a quick-and-dirty way to assess the balance of funding allocations for CC and SC respectively, we asked a small sample (it was not statistically valid) of MC participants to rate several simple evaluative statements, such as: “I have the resources and support I need to: ‘identify smart strategies’ (SC) and to: ‘cultivate a sustainable stewardship community’ (CC).” The average rating for SC-related statements was between 4 and 5 (5 is high), while for CC items it was between 2 and 3 (see Figure A24).

Community of practice leadership roles



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Figure 10. Key leadership roles for organizing communities of practice

Key leadership roles in a strategic initiative to organize communities of practice include: sponsorship, coordination, and support (see Figure 10 above).²⁰ Of all of these, the coordinator role is most crucial because strategic communities of practice require continuous care and feeding to thrive. CoPs are “organic” in the sense that they cohere by dint of the shared passions and personal relationships of members. But as participation rates and the range and intensity of activities grows, skilled proactive coordination is essential to success.

For large-scale community initiatives, sponsors are needed to provide strategic guidance; public visibility and legitimacy; and to gain access to influential players and resources. Sponsorship is often needed to fund a dedicated community coordinator, which as noted is a key factor for the success of highly active strategic communities.

A leadership syllogism applies the CCxSC TOC to link community coordination and results:

- If there is a coordinator with strong skills, sufficient time, and sponsor support, then there is a robust community of practice
- If there is a robust community of practice, then there will be exceptional results (for example, “closing the gap” on the percentage of kids ready for school)
- Thus (other things being equal...), if there is a capable coordinator, then there will be exceptional results

Bottom line: Are we investing enough in our results-team (/community) coordinators?

²⁰ For more on leadership roles, see W.M. Snyder and X. de S. Briggs, op. cit., pp. 43-48

The functions of results-team coordinators in Providence illustrate key activities directly related to CCxSC as well as ancillary management-type tasks:

- “It’s the work behind the public activities—including conversations, planning, etc.—that makes it successful.”
- “I thought the role was about paying me to think and build relationships and organize partnerships and focus on results. And all that is true, but there is a lot of collateral activity to make that happen.”
- “About 20% of my time is spent on grant-management, collecting data, reporting, and responding to AECF requests for information.”
- *Coordinator functions directly related to building collaborative capacity:*
 - o Coach local partners to help them better serve residents’ needs
 - o Facilitate access to resources, such as AECF expertise and socio-economic information
 - o Get to know residents personally to help them move ahead
 - o Bring organizational partners to MCLI so participants can hear from others in the community
 - o Talk individually with partners to go deeper on strategy (“this takes a lot of time”)
 - o Integrate activities related to FES, CHAPSS, and REAL that span results-team boundaries (“We are working all the time on cross-over opportunities and integrating activities across strategy areas”).

Bottom Line: “Here’s what I need to succeed”:

- Coaching on skills and methods about the collaborative process
- Time to build understanding and relationships among residents and partners
- Sponsorship that visibly promotes the collaborative process as well as strategy-making and accountability for results.

AECF provides a number of leadership functions in the Making Connections program, including program sponsorship and management as well as content- and process-oriented expertise. The Providence case illustrates strengths and challenges for AECF in these roles:

- Sponsor Strengths
 - o AECF is renown for its expertise: staff members with considerable skills and years of experience in key areas; extensive research produced and made available through reports and website (“lead with ideas”)
 - o Strategic clarity and rigorous efforts to measure results and learn from them
 - o Influence and legitimacy among stakeholders at local and national levels
 - o Commitment—passion for helping vulnerable kids and families; long-term investments to “turn the curve”

- Sponsor Challenges
 - o Management style: “Casey needs to move from ‘adult-child’ to ‘adult-adult’ relationship with local participants”; and needs to model CC more effectively in its relationships with site-based participants (cf. Level 4 collaboration in Figure 1, p. 4)
 - o Administrative load: “Working for Casey on administrative tasks can sometimes get in the way of working for families”
 - o Building up the diversity, alignment and influence of both local and national sponsorship groups
- Support Role Successes
 - o “[AECF staff member] has been a great support. She helps us think through overall strategies, priorities, etc. She pushes us in a way that is not top-down”
 - o “[AECF staff member] represents the reality of program requirements and opportunities to all critical partners. She brings the knowledge and voice of the Foundation to meetings”
- Support Role Challenges
 - o How can support systems (LLP, TARC, AECF online knowledge base, Communications, diarists, etc.) strengthen collaborative capacity as well as strategy work?

Summary

No matter how well-honed the methods or well-designed the structures, collaborative capacity strategies will not succeed without strong leadership. And it is important to recognize that leadership in participative, inclusive structures—whether conventional organizations, neighborhood communities, or communities of practice—is much harder than conventional top-down leadership. For strategic initiatives that involve an array of local partners as well as residents, success depends on an ecology of leadership types, including thought leaders, weavers, evangelists, and knowledge stewards; key roles for organizing communities of practice are sponsorship, coordination, and support.

H. Staff Development

A commitment to CCxSC strategies has implications for staff skills, attitudes, and behaviors. All staff—including institutional leaders, specialists, and community organizers—need to understand more about what collaboration means and learn the skills and methods for practicing under difficult conditions. Given the challenges and the emergent state of the field, a CCxSC skill-gap is to be expected. A draft report on lessons learned from the Making Connections experience explained that while the initial role specifications covered key requirements, the requisite skills and mindsets related to CC were not sufficiently specified or emphasized. There were benefits to having site leaders with strong content expertise (in areas such as FES and CHAPPS), for example, but experience showed that CC-related process skills were equally important. In some cases site leaders did not have sufficient buy-in to the “overarching theory of change,” nor the will or ability to spend time on site and get to know the people and local conditions; in some cases staff members simply did not have sufficient skills for “place-based community change.”

As the Making Connections program evolved, staff skill requirements for leading change became clearer. As described in an internal draft MC report, these include:

- Work across systems, ideologies, and professional cultures
- Convene and communicate with diverse stakeholders (residents, community groups, faith leaders, and others)
- Cultivate broad ownership of the change agenda using ideas and seed grants
- Understand the challenges and nuances of building a local “movement.”²¹

Initial steps for closing the skill gap include defining more clearly the skills and attitudes that are consistent with a CCxSC approach; assessing the gap between current and desired levels; and organizing ways (such as Learning Exchanges) to close the gap.²²

CCxSC skills are not practiced in a vacuum, so it is essential to consider the organizational and environmental factors that influence the expression of relevant skills, behaviors, and attitudes. Organizational factors include time allotted for collaborative work and relationship-building; how people are selected and developed (including up-front training and ongoing mentoring as well as participation in Learning Exchange activities); funding for central staff to spend time at local sites; and assessment and rewards (including AECF’s “performance-based accountability” process). Site leaders are crucial for success, but the lessons learned about skills in this role can be generalized to all those who participate—whether AECF staff, community coordinators, or site-based residents, partners, and LME’s. In this sense, the identity of “staff” is broadened beyond those directly employed or funded by AECF. Indeed, in collaborative systems the skills of participants throughout the system are key to success. Finally, site-based environmental factors, of course, also influence types and levels of program-staff skill requirements; for example: local levels of social capital, residents’ self-organizing skills, and financial resources.

I. Program Design (Making Connections)

From a CCxSC perspective, the three Making Connections results areas—FES, CHAPSS, and REAL—represent two distinct types of outcomes. Two are about “content” (FES and CHAPSS) and one is primarily about “process” (REAL). Content and process are interrelated of course, but may best be described as orthogonal dimensions that fit on a T-shaped matrix, with CCxSC processes along the horizontal axis and various content-oriented initiatives along the vertical axis (see Figure 11 below). FES and CHAPSS fit on the vertical dimension because they are about content-oriented outcomes such as family economic success and children healthy and ready for school. REAL fits on the horizontal axis because it is about process-oriented efforts to engage residents and develop leaders. Planning and engagement processes are valuable to the extent that they serve content-oriented outcomes that families care about most—the health and education of their children and their family’s economic success. (From a broader perspective, REAL can also be considered “content-oriented” in the sense that connectedness among

²¹ Paraphrased from “Learning While Doing the Three ‘R’s’: Results, Roles & Relationships,” AECF internal draft for review, August 9, 2007, pp. 3-5.

²² A comparison between the criteria listed here and the several lists of functions associated with the leadership for results-teams/communities in the Leadership Section 3G (pp. 35-37) may help further define the site-leader role.

CCxSC as an AECF core competence in the context of an overall “architecture of expertise”

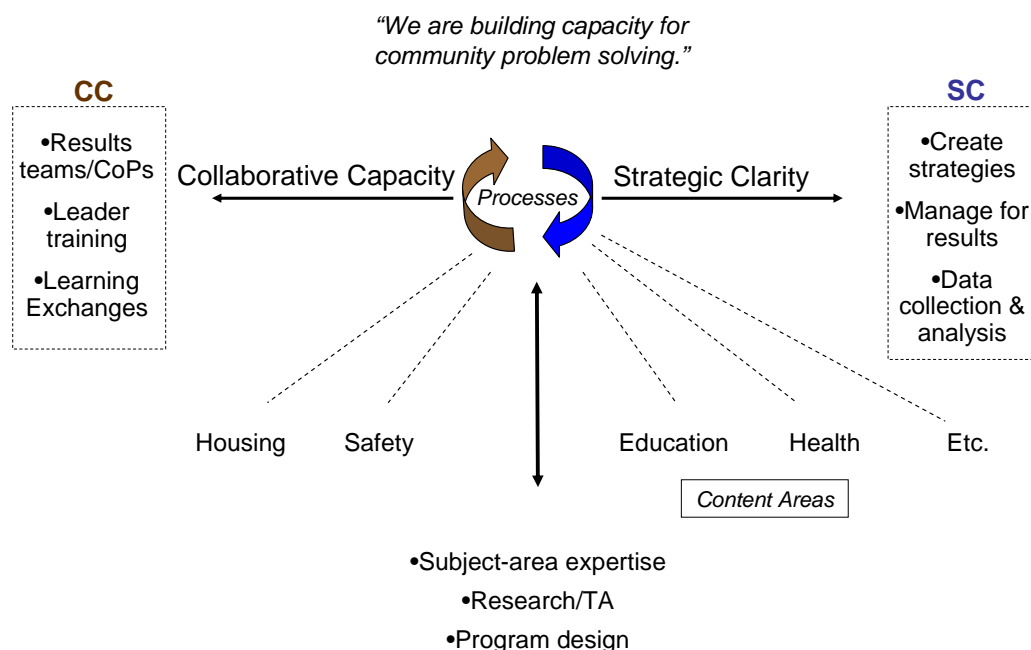


Figure 11. T-shape Framework describing orthogonal relationship between core CCxSC capabilities and program applications in particular outcome areas

local residents and partners (aka “social capital”) is a valuable outcome in itself. The distinction here is thus more a matter of emphasis than an absolute, categorical one.)

The nature of REAL as a process-oriented activity raises an important program-design issue. Given that an essential element of CC is engaging and organizing residents, activities associated with REAL logically fit within an overall CCxSC capability (along with efforts related to partner-engagement).

It may also make sense to incorporate LLP as an element of a broader CCxSC function. A “CCxSC Process Team” could integrate REAL and LLP as well as related CC and SC support activities (such as TARC data-based functions). LLP is designed to “build the capacity of residents, partners, and staff to establish targets, integrate learning, and maintain accountability through the effective use of data and evaluation.”²³ These capabilities enhance processes related to both strategy-making and collaboration. The LLP work reinforces the positive mutual contributions between these processes by helping residents and partners collaborate on planning and implementation activities that build collaborative capacity while achieving strategic results. The LLP data-analysis and action-learning processes that involve partners could be folded into a more broadly defined CCxSC process team whose purpose is to support FES and CHAPSS results teams.

²³ “Making Connections Providence: Priorities for 2007,” p. 10.

There are several advantages to a structured integration of REAL and LLP as components of an inclusive CCxSC strategy:

- Both REAL and LLP methods and resources can be more fully leveraged by integrating them into comprehensive CCxSC strategy focused on targeted results areas. This helps focus activity, reduce coordination overheads, and realize synergies.
- REAL and LLP processes exist to promote content-oriented outcomes for kids, families, and their communities. Creating new resident relationships and documenting lessons learned may not in themselves justify the investments involved. An inclusive CCxSC team can increase accountability for results and heighten awareness of the instrumental purpose of process-oriented activities to contribute to content-oriented outcomes.
- The CCxSC group can focus on building an integrated capability that includes both collaboration and strategy-making processes—consistent with the argument that they are much more powerful when intentionally combined. The group can provide expertise and support related to conventional civic engagement processes (such as voting rates, board membership, and public advocacy), while expanding this repertoire to include a variety of others, including dialogic problem-solving, community-organizing, social network analysis, conflict-management, principled negotiation, participatory planning, whole-system design, and others. (See a range of related activities listed in Tables A1a-b.)

A more general CCxSC analysis of program design (LLP and REAL are particular to the MC program) can evaluate the extent to which specific processes, structures, and roles align with CCxSC characteristics. A basic question to ask about any program is the extent to which it features collaborative structures. Making Connections involves a number of such structures, principally results teams, but also others such as “community learning networks” and “resident leadership networks.” Other programs—such as New Futures, Family to Family, and MHI 4 Urban, also seem to feature such structures, while others, such as Jobs Initiative and Neighborhood Health Initiative do not. (This observation draws on one-paragraph summaries of the programs and thus is more speculative than definitive. See Table A2 for more detail.) This is not to say that every program should choose to emphasize the CCxSC approach, but rather to question the extent to which such design choices are intentional and systematic.²⁴ From a broader perspective, Section 4 below describes how CCxSC can be framed as a strategic “core competence” that can be applied across AECF programs, and how it can be positioned as a distinctive capability in the eyes of beneficiaries, partners, and other stakeholders.

* * *

²⁴ For any program, a simple CCxSC analysis can be done to assess the extent to which there are CC-type *structures* (such as the MC results teams) that are sufficient for promoting collaboratives *processes* such as “team decision-making” or “participatory planning.” The CCxSC TOC states, essentially, that collaborative problem-solving processes depend on corresponding collaborative multi-stakeholder structures. Figure A25 (based on an internal AECF report) shows how an assortment of program elements can be distinguished in general terms as either processes or structures (and related roles). This type of framework can help make more explicit how well programs match up collaborative structures and processes, and how well they define key leadership roles.

4. CCxSC AS A CORE COMPETENCE AT THE CORPORATE LEVEL

Does AECF consider CCxSC a strategic “core competence”?

AECF has been a pioneer in efforts to apply the CCxSC approach in the context of Making Connections as well as other programs, and it has made considerable financial and strategic commitments along the way. (The program’s title highlights its strategic commitment to a collaborative approach.) The growing recognition of the benefits of CCxSC applications across programs indicates the emergence of CCxSC as an organization-wide “core competence.” A recent analysis of the philanthropy sector described an array of strategic roles that foundations play relative to their work—including “traditional grantmaker,” “outcome-focused convener,” “incubator,” and “field catalyst/orchestrator.” An AECF report stated that this last role was closest to AECF’s role in Making Connections, but that a better term is “Catalytic Operator and Outsider.” Making Connections initiatives have catalyzed insights, action, and relationships in various communities; and as an outsider, AECF has provided access to networks, legitimacy, and resources that were beyond the reach of local players. AECF’s role description highlights particular functions it provides for beneficiaries and stakeholders. This section focuses on CCxSC as a strategic competence that is essential to AECF’s success as a catalytic operator and outsider. It also looks at how this competence can be deployed more systematically across AECF initiatives.

Strategy theorists over the last two decades have stressed the importance of identifying and leveraging “core competencies” (or a related notion, “distinctive competencies”). In highly competitive and turbulent markets, where globalization and securitization have nearly eliminated conventional sources of competitive advantage (such as privileged access to resources, markets, and capital), knowledge-based assets are paramount.²⁵ Thus for AECF a key strategic question is: “How can we best leverage our core competencies across all our programs and services to fulfill our mission?”

²⁵ The emphasis on knowledge-based sources of competitive advantage as the drivers for market success began with work by organization theorists in the 1980’s and came to prominence in the early 1990’s as firms discovered that continuous efforts to innovate and build capabilities was necessary to compete. (Detroit’s auto companies, for example, realized brand loyalty would no longer trump quality.) The term “distinctive competence” (introduced by Michael Porter in *Competitive advantage: Creating and sustaining superior performance*, 1985) refers to “what we do better than competitors,” while the term “core competencies” denotes “capabilities we can leverage across diverse products/markets.” Both highlight the importance of focusing strategic attention on exceptional capabilities, with the assumption that organizations can no longer expect to differentiate themselves throughout the value chain or succeed as conglomerates in unrelated industries (GE is an exception that proves the rule—general management is one of their core competencies.) A seminal article that brought CEO-level attention to the core-competence strategy was published in *Harvard Business Review* in 1990 (“The core competencies of the corporation,” 68: 79-91), just as attention to the “knowledge era” requirements for success were coming to the fore. Two business school professors, C.K. Prahalad and Gary Hamel, wrote the article and subsequent best-selling books that further elaborated related principles. Examples of core competencies: for Apple, Inc., it may be integrated product-engineering and design; for UPS, it may be world-wide delivery-logistics; for AEC it may be CCxSC. From a knowledge-based strategy perspective, the value of an organization’s brand (and market value generally) waxes or wanes depending on how well it maintains widespread trust in its ability to deliver exceptional results in high-value markets. A knowledge-based strategic analysis of AECF could apply either a distinctive- or core-competence framework. For purposes of this discussion, we will assume CCxSC is a distinctive capability for AECF; the focus here is on the extent to which it is being leveraged as a core competence across programs.

The T-shaped matrix outlined by Figure 11 (p. 40, above) describes two orthogonal, complementary capability dimensions. On the vertical axis are arrayed competence areas related to content-oriented outcomes for kids and families—health, education, income, and others. On the horizontal axis, CCxSC is represented as a process-based competence that can be applied to programs that address any one of these content areas. The combination of process and content capabilities provides a unique “architecture of expertise” that can leverage powerful synergies between the two (while also leveraging the implicit CCxSC synergy that is embedded in the process dimension; cf. Section 1).

If we consider CCxSC as a core competence for AECF, then a number of questions follow: How systematically and effectively are AECF managers and staff leveraging the CCxSC capability in programs across the board? How well does AECF partner with others at national and local levels to take advantage of synergies between its core competence and those of other organizations? How does AECF’s core competence fit with its role as a catalytic operator and outsider?

Defining CCxSC as a core competence

One way to make the CCxSC core competence more explicit is to create a matrix that identifies key elements as they are applied across various programs. A program-analysis matrix that differentiates processes and outcomes (based on Figure 11, p. 40 above) can be used to show how the CCxSC core competence shows up in various AECF programs. The matrix can highlight similarities and differences among programs regarding how CCxSC capabilities are applied at the program level (see Table A2 for a rough illustration). Further, the analysis can distinguish collaborative capacity *structures* (such as results teams) from strategic clarity *processes* (such as participatory planning) (see Figure A25).

Current State: At this point, the application of CCxSC across AECF programs seems to vary considerably (based on the very small sample included in Table A2). The variance in types and levels of applications is one indication of strategic uncertainty about the distinctive nature or centrality of this capability. Staff comments (cited in internal reports) suggest that CCxSC is a core competence, though their comments also reflect the emergent state of the CC approach:

- Indications of centrality:
 - “[The] power and utility of positive social networks...has emerged as a defining attribute and strategy for our work.”
 - “We have lifted community engagement up as a central part of Casey processes and practices...[we] won’t be as strategic and effective ... as we want to be unless we pursue resident engagement intentionally [and] systematically....”
 - “[R]elationships we formed through grants positioned Casey in their eyes as a foundation that appreciates the role and significance of community organizing...in wake of ...Katrina...[they] approached us quickly with suggested responses.”
- Indications of emergent state:
 - “[Collaborative approaches are] persistent, recurrent, but under-acknowledged aspect...for systems reform and community change.”

- “Although we didn’t always focus on community engagement directly...RCI...brought [our] tacit understanding...to [the] surface.”

Implementation Issues

If AECF wants to move from emergent, incremental applications of CCxSC to ones that are more intentional and systematic, there is considerable work to be done. Issues include: AECF’s readiness to assert its strategic commitment to CCxSC as a distinctive, core competence; its ability to build leading-edge capabilities and apply them across the board; and its outreach to partners who can combine efforts to leverage CCxSC for results.

Asserting strategic intent clearly and publicly is essential for engaging staff and stakeholders (including local residents and partners) in efforts to apply CCxSC methods. A shared understanding among stakeholders is crucial to integrating strategies and coordinating activities across organizations and discrete initiatives. Assessment questions along these lines include:

- How ready is AECF today to assert CCxSC as a core strategy related to policy as well as operational programs?
- How can AECF more definitively communicate its commitment to this core strategy with beneficiaries, partners, policy makers and other stakeholders (local and national)?

A commitment to raise the profile and expand the application of the CCxSC approach has implications for types and levels of expertise required of AECF staff, contractors, and partners:

- To what extent have CCxSC elements been translated into skill requirements and other system and structural elements (see for example, Sections 3H on staff development, 3B on methodologies, and 3I on structural options such as a CCxSC process team)?
- What is AECF’s plan to diffuse CCxSC knowledge and skills gained from MC to other programs, now and in the future? (cf. Section 3E on Learning Exchanges and Section 6 (pp. 54-55) below on an internal CoP)
- How can AECF combine efforts with partners that have complementary capabilities?

AECF has an opportunity to ramp up its deployment of CCxSC as a high-profile core competence to dramatically improve targeted results. To accelerate development, AECF can begin by conducting a systematic assessment of CCxSC applications across programs. At a high level, a project team familiar with the work can identify which programs are actively applying elements of the overall CCxSC capability, how they are implemented, how well, and with what results. These gross ratings can be supplemented with stories that bring the numbers to life and help identify success factors, obstacles, and contextual influences. Selected stories can also be used to communicate the possibilities more broadly to stakeholders. (This composite quantitative-qualitative assessment approach is consistent with the one described in Section 3C on measurement.)

Such an analysis provides a platform for development efforts to achieve quantum advances in CCxSC capability. Development activities may include:

- Conduct clinics with participants in past programs to reflect on how CCxSC approaches were used, could have been used, and could be used in the future

- Talk with researchers and expert practitioners who have designed and implemented CCxSC-based programs; also draw on AECF internal reports (such as those cited here) that document lessons learned and recommendations
- Integrate CCxSC more systematically during the program-development process by referring to elements of a CCxSC system model as described in Section 3
- Conduct “design charettes” to learn more about how CCxSC strategies can work in the context of particular programs.²⁶

Summary

There is a compelling opportunity for AECF to apply CCxSC as a distinctive, core competence at a much more systematic and intensive level to achieve exceptional results for vulnerable kids and families. But a number of challenges remain—including implementation issues discussed in this section and three broader challenges that are explored in Section 5 below: business model inertia, the inherent difficulty of CCxSC in practice, and a paradigm shift in power relationships. The issues raised in this section may be summed up in terms of a strategic vision and the capabilities—organizational and inter-organizational—required to achieve it:

- Vision*: Is the CCxSC strategic vision—and its importance for mission achievement—clear and widely shared among AECF leaders, staff, and program participants? Does AECF want to be position itself as a world-class leader in the development and implementation of CCxSC approaches?
- Organizational capability*: Do AECF leaders and staff see the need for concerted system-development efforts (such as those described in Section 3) to build up its CCxSC capability and realize its potential across AECF programs?
- Inter-organizational capability*: If AECF is going to make greater progress in this area, it cannot go it alone. A quantum shift in skills and attitudes regarding CCxSC approaches will demand change among key stakeholders at local and national levels, including residents, partners, policy makers and leaders across all sectors. The pervasive influence of local civic culture argues that AECF must be acutely attentive to the strength of civic-engagement beliefs and behaviors in sites where it operates. Several practical questions follow:
 - How can AECF assess initial levels of CCxSC capabilities in targeted sites?
 - How enhance its capacity to embody CCxSC in program designs, partner specifications and selection, recruitment of co-sponsors, and sustainability plans?
 - Given the dependence on multiple parties to apply these strategies and get results, is AECF prepared to contribute to a social movement for growing CCxSC capabilities more broadly? (cf. Section 6 (pp. 55-56) regarding an external CoP and Section 7)

* * *

²⁶ These CCxSC analyses could be conducted as ongoing development activities by members of an internal CCxSC community of practice (or institute); cf. Section 6, pp. 54-55.

5. CHALLENGES TO A FULL-FLEDGED CCxSC APPLICATION

AECF staff who reviewed the results of the initial Providence study saw the potential of a CCxSC strategy and strongly supported more concerted efforts to apply it in MC and other program contexts. Participants nevertheless argued that there are good reasons it has not been fully leveraged to date; among them are business model inertia, the inherent difficulty of boundary-crossing collaboration, and the power shifts that are involved.

Business model inertia

An organization's business model involves a myriad of strategies, structures, and systems as well as other elements designed to deliver products and services related to its mission and objectives (cf. discussion of the "CCxSC system" on p. 17). These elements are tightly integrated and in established organizations they are not easy to change. The analysis here suggests that while Making Connections (and AECF overall) has emphasized both strategic rigor and collaboration, the systems and practices related to strategic clarity appear to be more highly developed and intensively applied than those associated with collaborative capacity.

The bias of strategic clarity over collaborative capacity is manifested in the Making Connections CCxSC system elements (as discussed in Section 3), and it has been raised in reports and conversations with participants (including residents as well as local and national staff). Here is a selection of comments that refer to this bias:

- "Mechanisms of strategy now trump what is needed to involve residents/[partners], which we need to do to deliver sustainable results"
- "As one trustee said, "Strategy is the big thing; the rest is tactics""
- "Measurement is a big factor. It seems like when the board members visit they're always asking us about the numbers [and less so about how we are achieving them]." (This was a resident comment.)
- "To make any approach palatable to senior management, it must clearly specify tasks, goals, benchmarks, and assessments."
- "Pushing scud TA," is a term that was described by Baltimore-based staff as an occasional behavior in which standard solutions are pushed onto people in the field; it happens when there is not enough collaboration between parties to gain a mutual understanding of the solutions and the extent to which they match current needs and the local context (This point and the following are examples of the Level 4 collaboration challenge described in Figure 1, p. 4)
- "AECF 'leads with ideas,' but it seems that they are mostly defined from headquarters with limited participation of the grassroots; the focus of the board of directors is data collection and measurement; the Foundation defines the TOC, but it's not clear how we fit in; it's not co-defined; if you look at the fish diagram, the tail [collaborative learning and action elements] should be the driving force...." (See Figure A26 for the "fish diagram.")

It is easier to fit SC methods with a top-down performance ethic than to do this for CC, which by definition is both bottom-up and top-down as well as side-to-side. In the case of collaborative capacity, no direction is privileged, and each has distinctive strengths and

weaknesses. Effectiveness depends on how they are combined. While CC approaches are results-focused, they are more difficult than SC methods to define in objective terms. The practice of CC by definition depends on voluntary participation by diverse stakeholders; thus it entails a great deal of uncertainty, including phases of apparent chaos. (This distinction with strategic clarity is certainly not absolute; strategy-making in turbulent environments also involves plenty of uncertainty.)

AECF's emphasis on strategic rigor, content expertise, and performance evaluation is not the problem; rather, the issue is a matter of balance and fit. The comments cited above reflect a consensus that there is insufficient attention to the CC side of the CCxSC equation. This imbalance may persist simply because leaders do not see it. A gap between an organization's "theory-in-use" and its espoused theory often occurs when leaders' strategic mindsets do not register contradictory data.²⁷ Seeing the gap is a crucial beginning. Making shifts in strategies, structures, and systems depends on this.

If this business-model analysis has merit, there are several change-management questions worth considering: How ready are AECF staff as well as local residents and partners to further emphasize CC approaches that are inherently uncertain, complex, and dynamic? What more can AECF staff—and at this point, LME staff—do to foster shared authority and accountability for local initiatives among all participants? More generally, should AECF shift further from a conventional "center of excellence" model towards a high-profile coordinator (or "weaver") role, thus balancing its strong focus on strategies and tactics with greater emphasis on methods for connecting diverse players (cf. Figure 12, p. 52)?

Inherent difficulty of boundary-crossing collaboration

Russell Ackoff, a prominent social scientist and expert on large-scale change, defined complex systems as "messes." Certainly the conditions of civil society meet this description, and this explains why it is so difficult to solve problems from outside a system and why standardized solutions are often problematic. Civil society is where players from all sectors—private, public, and non-profit—and their various interests and activities converge.²⁸ In this context, there are generally no robust mechanisms for coordinating efforts to steward the common good or to hold stakeholders collectively accountable for public outcomes ("the tragedy of the commons" problem). Most sectors have their own accountability mechanisms: business via market pricing; government via the vote; schools via certification and student choice; non-profits via funder evaluations; and faith-based organizations via member participation and institutional doctrine.

²⁷ Chris Argyris and Donald Schon (*Organizational learning: A theory of action perspective*, 1978) have conducted extensive research—both theoretical and practice-oriented—about the common distinction between an intended strategy and how it is applied. They distinguish between an "espoused" theory and a "theory-in-use." At both individual and organizational levels, there are generally gaps between the two (often unrecognized by the actors), and these typically lead to what they call "unintended consequences."

²⁸ Given the CCxSC emphasis on multi-stakeholder collaboration for the common good, the term "civil society" is defined here as a civic composite that includes businesses and government agencies as well as others that are typically included, such as civic and community groups, non-profits, faith organizations, foundations, and professional associations.

But there are no generally accepted, rigorous mechanisms by which the amorphous confluence of stakeholders known as civil society holds itself collectively accountable.²⁹

Even with good accountability mechanisms, inter-organizational partnerships are difficult to start and sustain. In fact, mergers and acquisitions in the private sector fail to meet expectations nearly 75% of the time, about the same failure rate for civic partnerships. (Though inter-organizational private-sector networks that collaborate on various value-chain activities—research, marketing, production, etc.—are widespread and highly successful.) But at current capability levels, the failure rate for civic initiatives would likely be even higher if they were attempted nearly as often as they are needed. The lack of measurement and accountability mechanisms means there is much less motivation than in the private sector to initiate boundary-crossing collaboration efforts. Often it takes a local disaster or crisis to catalyze a civic coalition. A successful private-public partnership in Cleveland, for example, was formed only because an industrial-waste fire erupted on the Cuyahoga River.

A study on partnership in the healthcare sector provides a list of factors that influence the success of inter-organization collaboration (see Box 1 below).³⁰ Here we will consider

Success Factors: Determinants of Partnership Synergy – Lasker, et al., 2002	
Resources <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Money ▪ Space, equipment, goods ▪ Skills and expertise ▪ Information ▪ Connections to people, organizations, groups ▪ Endorsements ▪ Convening power 	Partnership characteristics <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Leadership ▪ Administration and management ▪ Governance ▪ Efficiency
Partner characteristics <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Heterogeneity ▪ Level of involvement 	External environment <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Community characteristics ▪ Public and organizational policies
Relationships among partners <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Trust ▪ Respect ▪ Conflict ▪ Power differentials 	

Box 1. Factors for successful collaborative structures (Healthcare case)³¹

²⁹ There has been progress on this front in recent years. Researchers such as Robert Putnam have developed ways to measure levels of civic engagement and a number of cities have established civic indicators that assess outcomes in areas such as health, housing, education, and economic development (see for example the Boston Indicators Project: www.bostonindicators.org).

³⁰ Kadushin et al. (op cit.) argue that multi-stakeholder coalitions are often unsuccessful and therefore that partnerships should be more limited in terms of focus, timeframe, and expected participant commitments. Lasker et al. (op cit.) also warn of a high failure rate and the various “drawbacks of collaboration” (180, 191), but they argue that actors can increase success rates and improve outcomes by taking advantage of “synergy” opportunities (183-184).

³¹ A key factor missing in Box 1 is the visibility and urgency of the problem(s) being addressed. As mentioned, it often takes a conflagration of some type to catalyze civic collaboration.

several interrelated factors that are particularly relevant to the Making Connections case: insufficient or misleading incentives; lack of involvement by experienced practitioners and leaders of partner organizations; skills and mindsets; and distrust among participants (cf. the “challenges” paragraph in the Providence mini-case in Section 2, pp. 13-14):

- *Insufficient or misleading incentives*: Often incentives are inadequate for motivating players to work on “growing the pie” versus competing in a zero-sum game for self-advantage (cf. the “prisoner’s dilemma”)? Many organizations fear that collaboration may expose weaknesses or attenuate privileged relationships with powerful players. Non-profits often battle among themselves to establish their superiority in the eyes of funders and stakeholders. Rarely do they make concerted efforts on their own to collaborate with others, even when their missions and capabilities are complementary or overlapping. This is especially true in situations where there is not much social capital (an endemic condition in many struggling neighborhoods).

Incentives can be misleading when there are strong extrinsic reasons (such as money, visibility, or access to influence) for people to get involved. In this case, program grant opportunities make it harder to assess partners’ internal commitment to collaborative learning and action. As one participant said regarding current participation by non-profits working together under AECF MC umbrella grants, “Are the chickens going to continue to gather around when the farmer stops throwing the corn?”

- *Involvement of senior leaders and experienced practitioners*: How can program leaders ensure the right people from the right mix of partnering organizations show up at meetings and contribute to projects? Partnership activities take time and often do not immediately yield results that match an organization’s mission. Furthermore, non-profit and government agencies are often starved for resources, and they face increasing scrutiny to show near-term results for their own programs. Under these conditions it is hard for these organizations to assign experienced staff to inherently complex collaborative efforts.
 - o As for AECF, leaders of local organizations must deal with the same business-model inertia described above; they are often saddled with strategies, structures, and systems that discourage collaborative activity. The dominant preference is to focus on narrowly defined, quantifiable initiatives with clear organizational accountability. Leaders may believe in the CCxSC TOC, but institutional conditions and cultural norms make it hard to commit funds as well as staff time and expertise to collaborative work; (though collaborative approaches are getting more attention lately—in word if not deed).
- *CCxSC skills and mindsets*: In the civic context, building CCxSC skills is particularly challenging because participation is voluntary, conditions are challenging, and these skills are not easy to learn. These skills involve complex cognitive, behavioral, and interpersonal capabilities as well as the right values

and mindsets. Fortunately, not all participants need to be experts or equally committed to the enterprise; strong groups learn to leverage individual gifts and coalesce shared commitments over time. Moreover, there is a burgeoning set of skills, methods, and technologies to facilitate collaborative problem-solving among diverse stakeholders. A sample of relevant skills and methods includes: community-organizing (communities of practice as well as place), group problem-solving, multi-stakeholder dialogue, principled negotiation, appreciative inquiry, participatory planning, social network analysis, and conflict management.

- *Stakeholder distrust*: How provide a safe learning environment where players can acknowledge problems and deficiencies as well as share new discoveries and innovations without fearing others will show them up in public or claim the ideas as their own? In tough neighborhoods, applying CC among diverse partners is particularly difficult because the reservoir of social capital is often nearly dry, which is why provider-based solutions are so common (they depend less on collective problem-solving by locals); but attempts to circumvent the more fundamental need to build collaborative capacity generally fail in the long run if not sooner.

As stated up front, all these points are interrelated. For example, establishing trust depends on strong skills, aligned incentives, and the involvement of key leaders and practitioners; and these people are more likely to participate if activities are skillfully managed, incentives are aligned, and others they trust are involved.

For all these reasons, it is difficult for any organization to commit to a CCxSC approach. Without the right conditions in place, many efforts eventually collapse from “collaboration fatigue.” Unless there is a highly visible breakthrough that benefits all involved, it is very difficult for individual players—even those who are highly amenable to collaboration—to make strong, sustained commitments to collective initiatives.³² This can lead to a vicious cycle: lack of experience→lack of shared skills, norms, and trust→lack of success→lack of interest, initiative, and investments→lack of experience, and so on.

The prevalence and influence of these factors—inadequate incentives, unavailable players, deficient skills, and distrust—make it particularly hard to define in cookie-cutter, standardized ways how to apply collaborative-capacity strategies. Given the visibility of the work and the stakes for getting it right the first time, expertise and commitment by leaders is crucial. High-profile mistakes can be very difficult to overcome, particularly because collaboration relies so much on trust across organizations and constituencies. For example, in the early days of the Providence work a contentious approach to change exacerbated animosities and distrust among diverse players. It took several years to bring parties together and build up sufficient levels of trust to work closely together.

³² The risks associated with collaboration can be alleviated by beginning with forums for shared learning about the issues and each other. See Figure A27 for an illustration of a regional funder collaborative that started out as a “learning community” and over time evolved to a point where members were making significant, collective commitments such as pooled financial investments for targeted programs.

In sum, shifting towards a greater emphasis on CC involves action-learning in very difficult territory. Along with expressions of the hopes and dreams of what CC can accomplish, it is crucial to clearly acknowledge the risks and contingencies that must be addressed. This work requires as much or more discipline and focus as the development of content-oriented strategies and associated implementation plans. It takes concerted leadership to overcome decades of civic inertia and move beyond the status quo. This is particularly hard because CC is not widely understood or well-defined in operational terms.³³ It is difficult to get funding and support for cultivating “soft structures” that depend on shared passion and voluntary participation. Breaking the vicious cycle that reinforces apathy and discourages investments is crucial. In this situation, pioneering, “outsider” leadership can be truly catalytic.

Power Shift

As a participant in one of the small group sessions said, “Moving to a greater emphasis on collaborative capacity means a fundamental shift in power.” Collaboration involves decentralizing authority for making decisions (including strategies, tactics, and funding allocations), sharing responsibility for performance management, and distributing leadership and expertise more broadly among participants.³⁴ Indeed, this work entails a basic power shift that can be characterized as a transition from a hierarchical center-of-excellence model to a heterarchical peer-to-peer network in which “all parties speak with tongues” (see Figure 12 below). A number of comments in group conversations raised this issue:

- “Almost everything emanates from these dynamics [hierarchical norms and behaviors]; they pervade the whole system”
- “We were committed to a network model, but it didn’t work out as planned; what happened?”
- “Given the ‘authoritative expert’ orientation in our organizational culture, are we willing to say we don’t know?”

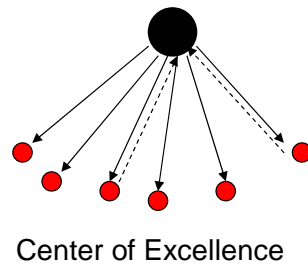
The powershift described here cannot be done by AECF alone. Collaborative capacity is after all an inherently communal phenomenon. One way to assess the lay of the land is to conduct an environmental analysis of likely partners at local and national levels (cf. Stakeholder Engagement Matrix, Figure A22). What does such an analysis say about the viability of major CC initiatives at either level? Are the United Way and other funders and national partners willing to commit to intensive CC approaches? Federal, state, city, and county governments? Are diverse faith communities willing to work together (at local and national levels)? Businesses, universities, healthcare organizations, non-profits, and others?

³³ In fact, much of the challenge of promoting a process-oriented community-engagement approach— versus specific, short-term, silver-bullet solutions—is persuading stakeholders that it is the most powerful route to exceptional, sustained results. As this approach becomes more visibly successful and gains legitimacy as a method for solving big problems, it is more likely to diffuse widely. The key challenges for spreading any innovation are getting initial adoption among a critical mass of leading practitioners and then “crossing the chasm” to the “early majority” (see Figure A28). This explains the importance of a “catalytic operator” (cf. p. 42) and CCxSC CoPs to build the practice, highlight successes, and establish legitimacy (see Sections 6 and 7).

³⁴ Organizational research argues that there are a number of sources of power in social systems, including authority, status, coercion, resources, and expertise (J.P.R. French & B. Raven, “The Bases of Power,” *Group Dynamics*, 1968). Work on notions of “rank” (A. Mindell, *Sitting in the Fire*, 1995) suggest an even broader set of such sources, including individual and social characteristics such as gender, ethnicity, race, age, physiognomy, relationships, and many others; relative rank in all cases is contextually interpreted.

How we lead with ideas: Center of excellence or community of practice?

To what extent is each model in play today?



Risks of hub-and-spoke model

- Reduced pace and extent of learning and innovation
- Reinforces top-down dynamics and reduces local ownership for implementation
- Less sustainable if coordinator reduces involvement

Where do we want to be?



Benefits of a community-of-practice approach include:

- Faster spread of innovations and transfer of “tacit” skills and expertise
- More leverage of complementary skills and influence across players
- Increased collaboration on action and advocacy initiatives

According to Metcalf's Law, the number of learning channels in a standard hierarchical model equals the number of nodes (for example, $n=6$), while in a mature peer-to-peer model, the number is increased exponentially ($n^2 = 36$).

Figure 12. How can sponsors best promote learning and collaboration among multiple sites?

A move towards CC among organizations (as in personal and group relationships) entails a fundamental shift in members' mindsets and behaviors as well as in organizational strategies, structures, and systems. Power dynamics are rife throughout the social system, at all levels. Thus local non-profits, businesses, government agencies, faith organizations, and others are likely to act according to the predominant hierarchical, competitive mindset rather than a collaborative, heterarchical one. This pervasive societal norm is exacerbated by declining rates of social capital.

But there is hope for a CC resurgence. Putnam's research notwithstanding, a remarkable countervailing force has emerged over the last decade: the dramatic rise in web-based, peer-to-peer interactions for learning and advocacy (as well as entertainment); and research shows these often spur increased face-to-face interactions rather than replace them.³⁵ Other positive trends include dramatic increases in applications of teams and communities of practice in large organizations. These factors have begun to influence traditional societal norms; after all, people “bring their work home,” and these experiences affect their civic identities. The question is to what extent these trends apply in neighborhoods characterized by the digital divide as well as by high levels of

³⁵ For a recent review of emerging organizing trends fueled by Web 2.0 technologies, see *Here comes everybody: The power of organizing without organizations*, C. Shirky, 2008.

unemployment, transience, and diversity. (Putnam’s recent work shows that social capital is relatively low in areas with residents from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds, whatever the income levels. Several Making Connections sites have nevertheless demonstrated that members of diverse communities can rally together for shared goals.)

It is unlikely that the civic powershift described here can establish roots at the scale of a single initiative. Indeed, it may be that positioning this work within a more comprehensive city-wide initiative—or an even broader social movement—is essential to recruiting the level of energy and aspiration needed to overcome embedded obstacles and achieve a critical mass of activity and involvement (cf. Section 6, pp. 57-58; Section 7). Paradoxically, it may take pioneering leadership from those in power today to establish a new culture of civic leadership in which both authority and responsibility are more widely distributed.

Summary

Quantum change is uncertain, scary, and difficult at any level, whether societal, organizational, group, or individual (and given their interdependence, change at all these levels is needed). Even in the private sector, most organizations implicitly choose bankruptcy or a hostile takeover rather than undergo radical changes needed to survive, must less thrive. Such changes need not take place all at once, but because the “gift of denial” (as a commentator in the religious sector calls it) is so widespread, firms (more accurately speaking, their executives) generally wait until they find themselves trapped on a burning platform before they leap.

AECF faces both internal and external challenges in the way of full-scale implementation of CCxSC approaches. Internal challenges include adjustments to a myriad of CCxSC system elements, including frameworks, methodologies, measurements, funding allocations, and staff skills. Externally, CCxSC initiatives depend on the commitment and competence of a vast array of stakeholders—including residents and partners at the local level and organizations across sectors as well as policy makers at local, state, and national levels. Thus the CCxSC challenges that AECF faces within are reflected in surrounding societal conditions.

The bottom-line for AECF is whether it sees an opportunity worth the investment of time, energy, and attention to build its CCxSC capabilities up to the next level. Many of the gaps and opportunities outlined here may or may not be accurately described. But the overall evidence suggests that if AECF is going to maintain world-class leadership in this field, it must shift up from incremental action-learning to quantum change; from technical improvements to transformational renewal.³⁶ The next section outlines a way to organize for transformative learning and action.

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³⁶ R. Heifetz makes this distinction in the context of leadership in *Leadership without easy answers*, 1998.

6. RECOMMENDATIONS: A WAY FORWARD

Cultivating community to build capability

The findings here suggest that AECF can best leverage its CCxSC opportunity by making a set of interrelated changes at program and organizational levels, while promoting corresponding changes with partners and program participants. The way to do this is not via scattershot problem-solving, but rather by constructing a robust social infrastructure for sustained, systemic capacity-building. The solution for AECF is thus the same as the one advocated for its partners and beneficiaries—cultivating communities of practice that build, share, and apply CCxSC capabilities to achieve desired outcomes.

The best way to build CCxSC competencies for AECF, as well as for its partners and stakeholders, is to cultivate CoPs at two levels, both internal and external.³⁷ There are synergistic benefits for doing both because the insights, relationships, initiatives, and legitimacy for communities at both levels will be mutually generative. Moreover, the processes for developing these communities draw on a common foundation of CoP research and practice, so the steps for getting started, coordinating activities, and weaving relationships are much the same. There are nuances in how these are implemented, however, and each community provides distinctive benefits. Finally, these internal and external communities can also promote the development of more formal institutes that manage major programs and help institutionalize the work among organizational stakeholders.

Internal CCxSC community of practice

An internal AECF community of practice can take on many of the CCxSC development challenges outlined in Section 3 of this report; for example: clarifying terms, identifying methods, improving measures, enhancing staff-development processes, and helping to design and coordinate Learning Exchange activities related to CCxSC (see summary pp. 17-18). At a more strategic level, an internal community can lead an initiative to systematically review AECF programs for opportunities to better leverage CCxSC as a core competence (cf. Section 3I and Section 4, pp. 44-45).

To get started, a small project team can organize initial forums and activities (such as small-group conversations, “open-space” meetings, and informal surveys) for AECF staff and invited program participants to flesh out an understanding of CCxSC and how it can be applied for attaining strategic goals. These activities can help coalesce a core group of people to lead a strategic CCxSC community of practice. This community, in turn, can work with a sponsor board to identify development opportunities such as those outlined in Section 3. The group may organize discrete project teams to take on particular issues, or it may simply coordinate with established groups—for example, the evaluation group for measurement issues, and program leaders for program-design issues. In any case, the internal CoP can lead or support various efforts to integrate CCxSC principles and practices more systematically in AECF programs and organization design elements.

³⁷ The influence of CCxSC at multiple levels reflects its fractal nature. It operates in local results teams, among site coordinators, across sites, across AECF programs, and among national players working on similar issues (see Figure 1, p. 4). Thus it follows that applying CCxSC more effectively and systematically at the program level means also applying it more rigorously within the Foundation and externally with peer organizations.

Basic steps for cultivating a community of practice include:

- Discovering people with shared passions and interests
- Bringing together interested participants to outline a vision and identify an action-learning agenda and to plan activities
 - o Depending on aspirations and expected resource requirements, identify support staff and establish a sponsor board (see Figure 10, p. 36)
- Coordinating ongoing action-learning activities; building the practice; expanding participation
 - o Community activities may include “case clinic” sessions, topical teleconferences, a CCxSC toolkit, projects, structured visits, surveys, experiential workshops, online knowledge base, and a listserv for announcements and Q&A (see Figure 7, p. 31)
- Establishing the community as a highly visible and respected forum for gaining insights and skills, collaborating on projects, and building professional networks.³⁸

Benefits of an internal community on CCxSC:

- Improve current programs (MC and others) and guide development of new ones
- Raise awareness of the work among AECF staff, program contractors, and partners as a rigorous and powerful discipline for getting results
- Develop and diffuse CCxSC ideas and methods; build staff skills and organizational capabilities; and increase AECF’s national reputation for CCxSC expertise.

Community-Institute hybrid

Community activities might also occur under the aegis of a more formal institute with assigned staff, dedicated budgets, and performance accountabilities. A community is distinguished from a formal unit by its emphasis on internal leadership, voluntary participation, and a focus on learning and connecting activities. Establishing a formal unit may be preferable when the group requires organizational decision-making authority and performance-management accountabilities to realize its potential. In this context, there are advantages to a combined, hybrid structure: An institute may have more influence and legitimacy for overseeing major projects, integrating work across divisions, and institutionalizing capabilities and services; a complementary CoP can coordinate a more improvisational mix of informal peer-to-peer activities that open up participation for a broader range of people to learn, connect, and contribute to the work.

Bottom line, an internal community of practice—whether on its own or as a prelude or complement to a more formal institute—can help AECF build and leverage CCxSC capabilities across programs and divisions to achieve breakthrough results.³⁹

External CCxSC community of practice

The process for cultivating an external CCxSC community of practice parallels one for an internal community. It starts with a small group of people who begin conversations with interested peers and convene gatherings (small or large, more or less formal or informal) with organization leaders from various sectors. These include leaders in government,

³⁸ See Figure A29 for a CoP development model that includes the steps listed here.

³⁹ The notion of informal-formal structural overlays applies at many levels—including the community-team hybrid discussed in Section 2, p 15 and described in Figure A18. Another way to frame this structural interaction is to see formalization as a natural evolution for highly developed communities that attain a reputation as authoritative arbiters of expertise as well as principal forums in their fields for ongoing practice- and professional development (see Stage 5 in the Community Development Model, Figure A29).

business, non-profits, and community coalitions as well as funders, researchers, practitioner experts, policy-makers, and other key stakeholders who are passionate about the topic and want to apply it more deeply and broadly in their work.⁴⁰

If there is sufficient interest and energy, these initial organizing activities will coalesce a CoP with an action-learning agenda that includes an array of short- and long-term initiatives. Building on a growing base of shared understanding and trust, the community can sponsor efforts to build and apply CCxSC capabilities. In some cases these activities will mirror those of AECF's internal community: an online resource center, for example, or a toolkit of frameworks and methodologies. In fact, where internal and external initiatives dovetail sufficiently, the development work can be done jointly, with members of the external community creating resources that can be applied back home. For example, members may collaborate on developing a social network analysis toolkit and associated workshops that are designed to be user-friendly for all participating organizations. This external-internal coordination makes it easier for practitioners across organizations to learn together and provide mutual support because they share a practice repertoire and speak the same language.

Distinctive opportunities for an external community:

- Raise the visibility and legitimacy of CCxSC for stakeholders, including policy-makers, local and national organizations (all sectors), and leading practitioners. This is a particularly important point because a good part of the civic-engagement challenge is helping people understand and act on the CCxSC theory of change: civic organizing \leftrightarrow smart strategies \leftrightarrow exceptional, sustained results; as opposed to the default preference for simplistic, short-term initiatives and silver-bullet solutions.
- Establish a “collaboration college” for a rapidly growing constituency of practitioners, organization leaders (all sectors), and policy makers who believe in the power of CCxSC approaches. A highly visible national organization (perhaps organized as a network of self-standing programs and institutes in the U.S. and beyond) can consolidate knowledge in the field; guide pioneering research and innovation; cultivate a global network of practitioners; certify practice standards and practitioner skills; and raise the visibility and legitimacy of CCxSC approaches. Overall, it provides an established home base for accelerating the development of thousands of practitioners with the skills required to apply CCxSC approaches on a large scale. (Graduation rates may eventually rival those of the nation's business schools, which now graduate over 100,000 MBA's a year.)

The collaboration college can advocate and encourage rigorous civic-engagement activities nationwide as a highly visible and influential catalyst for a spreading social movement. Increasingly, politicians (such as presidential candidate Barack Obama) and activists (such as Al Gore on the topic of climate change) are calling for dramatic increases in civic engagement as the foundational strategy for achieving ambitious social, economic, and environmental goals. (Interestingly, Obama's civic vision was

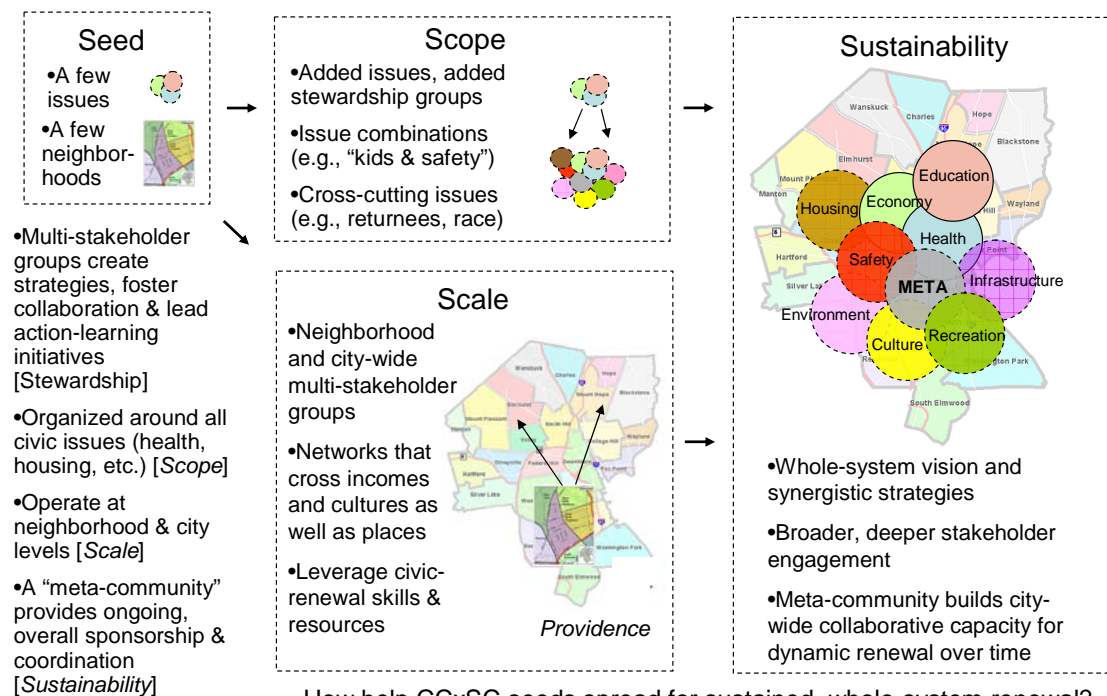
⁴⁰ For an example of an external community of practice on collaboration in the civic context (with an emphasis on online methods for learning and connecting), see www.tamarackcommunity.ca (based in Canada). Another community of practice that emphasizes collaboration as the key to civic renewal is the Alliance for Regional Stewardship (www.regionalstewardship.org); for a community focusing on multi-stakeholder collaboration at the global level, see Global Action Network Net (www.gan-net.net).

inspired in part by personal experience with the type of CCxSC work that AECF's MC program is all about: community organizing among residents and partners in the struggling neighborhoods of Chicago's South Side.) A collaboration college—or something like it—will be required to build the CCxSC capabilities at the scale and depth required for expanded and sustained civic stewardship.

A collaboration college, as described here, is a formal institutionalization of an external community, and thus parallels the idea of an AECF institute aligned with a corresponding internal community. Just as an internal CoP can foster the development of an AECF institute, so an external CoP can promote the evolution of a vision, strategy, and constituency for a collaboration college. In both cases, the CoPs foster relationships, informal learning, and a sense of shared identity; and this provides a foundation for highly vital and influential institutes. It is useful to treat these as complementary structures to take advantage of their respective strengths.

- Launch a collaborative civic-development initiative at the city-wide (or metro region) level to address multiple interrelated issues, including health, housing, education, safety, economic development, infrastructure, environment, recreation, culture, and others (see Figure 13 below). The visibility, scale, and scope of a city-wide, multi-issue initiative may be what it takes to overcome the historical sociopolitical inertia that plagues most cities today. An external community can bring together powerful national and local entities (including AECF) that have complementary skills, resources, and influence. These players, in turn, can help coalesce a critical mass of local citizens and stakeholder organizations to show what is possible.

Leveraging the Making Connections CCxSC approach to achieve city-wide renewal on an array of civic issues



How help CCxSC seeds spread for sustained, whole-system renewal?

Figure 13. Vision of a multi-issue, city-wide civic renewal strategy

The civic renewal work can begin by discovering what is happening already, enhancing those efforts, and initiating new pilots in strategic areas—all with the intention to expand in scale and scope over time. For AECF, such an initiative could help address current program challenges that it faces in participating communities: migration of residents across neighborhood boundaries; low levels of civic engagement, and the inextricable interrelatedness of civic issues (for example, housing and public safety as they relate to FES and CHAPSS; racial and ethnic issues that apply throughout). Further, a wider net of collaborating high-profile players may increase the pool of available resources and help consolidate the political will needed to achieve policy breakthroughs. Whether or not AECF helps to lead a multi-issue, city-wide effort, this systemic view of civic renewal may be a useful framework to guide program design and implementation planning.

Building capabilities through communities

In sum, the way for AECF to build its CCxSC capabilities is by cultivating both internal and external communities of practice. These communities can provide a vital social infrastructure for capacity-building in the field. They can also promote the development, accessibility, and influence of more formal institutes. Whatever the structural arrangement, AECF should take advantage of internal-external synergies, whether content-related (for example, toolkits, workshops, and an online knowledge base), process-related (coordinating events), or advocacy-related (gaining visibility and legitimacy). This last point is particularly important because the field is still in a nascent stage of development and needs evangelists for selling the vision and attracting investments of time, energy, and resources.

There are several ways that participation in an external community can benefit members of an AECF internal community: The reputation and expertise of external peers can help legitimize the value of internal CCxSC development efforts; participation in an external CoP provides opportunities for AECF staff to get wider recognition of their skills and accomplishments; and external networks can help AECF find new talent for its own programs. Finally, an external community can help AECF identify opportunities to work with partners on high-value projects (such as the civic renewal initiative described above) that require a vast array of skills and relationships.

The internal and external communities of practice (or community-institute hybrids) should combine a top-down strategic perspective with bottom-up organizing and innovation activities. They should be guided by a shared, overarching vision and strategy; and driven by committed, internally-led core groups that lead the efforts through rapid-cycle action-learning processes.

There is strong agreement among many MC staff and program participants that building up AECF's CCxSC competence is crucial for achieving exceptional, sustained results for vulnerable kids and families. As outlined throughout this report, whether on the ground, across sites, or among national partners, the way to build capability is through community. A combination of internal and external CCxSC communities can promote learning and innovation in the field, achieve breakthrough results, and contribute to a broader social movement for collaborative civic renewal.

7. A SOCIAL MOVEMENT: AECF's CATALYTIC LEADERSHIP OPPORTUNITY

AECF should leverage its leadership in the field to promote a national social movement for CCxSC approaches that can foster widespread civic renewal. At a societal level, CCxSC approaches have just begun to show their potential. We may now be at about the same stage of development—in terms of skills, methods, and mindsets—as business-management applications were in the 1950's.

But the pace of knowledge-development is much faster today than it was then. In recent years there has been exponential growth (albeit starting from a very small base) in multi-stakeholder collaborative initiatives. In fact, several trends show evidence that a CCxSC social movement is well underway:

- a burgeoning array of collaborative methods and organizations that help groups apply them
- growing awareness of civic engagement as a powerful complement (and corrective) to “politics as usual”
- increasing willingness among citizens and organizations across sectors to participate in multi-lateral collaborative efforts to solve complex problems.

Paradigm Shift

History shows that a strong civil society with the capacity for collaborative learning and action has always been the key to thriving communities, cities, and nations (see Box A3). Yet, despite the increasing visibility, rigor, and success of these approaches, the ratio of initiatives to opportunities—even obviously ripe ones—is miniscule. Consider the persistent, pervasive gaps and crises related to key civic issues (health, housing, education, economic development, and others) in any city; very few of these pressing issues have matching multi-stakeholder, collaborative groups providing stewardship. The default today is to leave it to government or non-profit agencies—or just leave it alone.

We may now be at an historic transition point. Given the urgency of today's social, economic, and environmental challenges, it is time for transformative change. We have tapped out the potential of “doing what we've always done,” (for example, conventional analyses of top-down, solution-driven policies and programs); if we do not find ways to radically increase our capacity for CCxSC, we are likely to “get what we've always got.”

AECF Leadership

The Annie E. Casey Foundation is a pioneer at the “bleeding edge” of CCxSC applications, in the context of Making Connections and other programs. It has taken risks to break new ground, and its shortfalls have been as important as its successes for discovering ideas and methodologies and building its capabilities and influence in this area. In all the conversations, observations, and materials reviewed for this report, AECF staff and program participants showed enthusiasm for learning more about CCxSC and applying it more systematically. It is a matter now of bringing together people with passion and experience in this area who can steward this work and help it achieve its potential. AECF's mission—helping vulnerable kids and families—provides a powerful motivation. As one staff member put it: “This is what we are here for.”

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